The Way of the World and Other Ways

A Story of Our Set.

Katherine E. Conway

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THE WAY OF THE WORLD AND OTHER WAYS

A STORY OF OUR SET

BY

KATHERINE E. CONWAY

BOSTON
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MDCCCC

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— Nay, the world, the world,
All ear and eye, with such a stupid heart
To interpret ear and eye, and such a tongue
To blare its own interpretation.

— TENNYSON.

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The Way of the World and Other Ways.

A STORY OF OUR SET.

CHAPTER I.

ARTIST AND WOMAN.

It would be hard to say who had the most responsibility in the matter.

No one had started out with the idea of doing anything blameworthy, or even unkind; for that unpleasant experience with Mrs. Josiah Mint had made all our ladies more careful.

Then why should one? She was such a gentle, harmless little woman; so preoccupied with her own work that she had no time to mind other people's business; and of too sensitive a conscience to be a meddler, even if she had had abundant leisure.

Her name did not come up in the earlier history of our set; for she was not a member of the Whist Club — indeed, she loathed whist — and she had no social axes to grind through her connection with the Daughters of St. Paula.

It is evident that of our discussion of Mrs. Mint's affairs, nothing reached her ears except

that lady's supposed heavy losses; and believing the rumor, she did what made her a friend for life.

That was just before Mrs. Mint bought Castle Montgomery; when the mystery of her ways for a few months gave rise to all those strange stories, which deceived many of us.

But if Esther Ward had heard the world's wonder of gossip, she would have contributed nothing to it.

"Though she's a chatty little body, she never tells you anything," said Mrs. Robert Ray.

Some of the less intellectual of the Daughters of St. Paula thought she was unobservant, and a little stupid, on matters outside her profession.

But Mrs. Peter Jones said that she was merely cute.

And Mrs. Tom Brown, the worried mother of three unmarried sons, said that if there was any one thing which every one of her sons hated more than another, it was a diplomatic woman.

On the subjects in question, however, Esther Ward was neither unobservant nor diplomatic. She was merely indifferent. So many things which preoccupied the attention of our friends already mentioned, seemed to her not worth while.

Of the rivalries between Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Bernard Willow for the exploiting of Lions, for example, she would have said to her own soul that they were not worthy of reasonable beings.

She wouldn't have submitted to the boredom — to put it on no higher ground — of talking this opinion over with anyone else.

Whence you will perceive that Esther Ward's charity of speech and silence were in certain aspects rather negative qualities. You need not, therefore, give her too much credit for them.

It seems, also, that she had more or less pride of intellect.

I don't hold a brief for Esther — I would not, even if women were more generally admitted to the Bar, and successful in legal practice.

This for the simple reason that she would not have accepted my services, even had they been tendered gratis.

She would have retained a man.

Her best friend could not deny that she enjoyed the society of men. Indeed, she did not deny it herself; only she said "clever men."

Whence, also, you will perceive that she had not a proper appreciation of the judicial or mental or social qualities of her own sex.

Therefore, feeling that my bigoted championship of her cause might not have been esteemed at its proper value, I may as well tell you that I think her actions in several cases were extremely imprudent; and that her failure to foresee their certain misconstruction was due to a bad case of moral invincible ignorance.

I don't mean that she did anything morally wrong — oh, dear no! Even Mrs. Jones in her bitterest moods would not have suggested that.

But Esther should have known that you cannot persistently keep your affairs to yourself, and even decline the friendliest overtures to enable you to make confidence, without giving some worthy people reason to think that you have a motive.

And to have a motive for every little thing certainly shows a nature deficient in openness.

I think myself that it would have been better that she had not painted Bertrand Coleman's portrait.

Indeed, his own sister said so long after, though she it was who had most vehemently urged the making of that self-same portrait. She forgot that, however, in the day of the inevitable consequences.

And she was really fond of Esther, and claimed to be her best friend. But Mrs. Willow and Mrs. Ray made the same claim in her regard, and also the same criticism.

Perhaps you have noticed, my gentle reader, that it is often our best friends who know just what we should have done, after all is over, but who, curiously enough, applauded the condemned course at the time.

Yet if Esther Ward had not painted Bertrand Coleman's picture she might still be —

Ah, well! it is better, perhaps, as it is for all

parties. Had she heeded her presentiment and refused, I should not have this story to tell.

. . . . . .

Let me begin, however, at the beginning.

When Esther Ward came to our city a few years ago, she brought with her as the achievement of her ten or twelve working years a very creditable reputation in artistic circles.

She had spent several years abroad under excellent masters.

Mrs. Willow rather insisted on this, by way of explaining and justifying her knowledge of one who had not yet been recognized by our set.

This was after a meeting of the Daughters of St. Paula. Whereupon Nannie Oldfield, one of the younger Daughters, to her friend, Minnie Gray, of course in an aside:

"What of three or four measly years in Europe. My Aunt Isabel has been to Europe seven times, and all around the world twice."

It was admitted by competent judges who had seen Esther Ward's pictures at the Exhibition, that she had spent her few years at Kensington and in various Italian art centers, to great advantage.

Indeed she had a talent, of which one critic — and he the greatest — had said with his wonted caution, that it was touched with genius.

She painted portraits with exceeding fidelity and grace.

Like Hawthorne's Hilda, however, she would rather have spent her days copying from the Old Masters. In this she was very successful, and had had a number of orders for her copies of Roselli's "Last Supper"; also for that little group of three angels from "La Disputa," which she loved so much and reproduced so well.

She had, however, yielded to the counsel of her master and certain friends among art critics, and painted a few of her own conceptions of sacred subjects, as, for example: "Christ Resting at Bethany," "Gethsemane," and "The Forsaken Christ." This last was based on that word of Scripture: "Then all these, leaving him, fled away," and was a very strong and pathetic presentation of Christ's going out from Gethsemane in the hands of his captors.

. . . . . .

You will agree with me, I am sure, that she should have kept to the work of painting altar-pieces for convent chapels and small churches, and not bothered about portraits.

But unfortunately for our conception of Esther's duty, while "The Forsaken Christ" was mentioned with distinction, it was her "Moss Rosebud," the portrait of a beautiful little girl of seven, with a cluster of half-opened white rosebuds in her hands, which took a prize at a certain art exhibition in New York.

After that she had three orders for portraits to

one for an altarpiece; and as she was dependent on her labor for her living, she had to take what she could get.

This fact that she had to work raised a nice question in our set. That was in the beginning, before we knew of her reputation in art circles.

Mrs. Ray did not really care to know people who worked for their living, but after a little talk with her husband, she told the ladies of the Whist Club that in her opinion neither painting pictures nor writing books was work.

Indeed, she never could get used to seeing school teachers received on equal terms socially, and had wished very much for a by-law excluding them definitely from the Daughters of St. Paula.

This, dear reader, was a high-class religious literary society. The Daughters met every Thursday at three o'clock in the afternoon, because they were ladies of leisure, and most of them wished in all things to distinguish themselves from the members of another larger and better-known literary association which met in the evening, and had many wage-earners on its register.

A few, like Mrs. Frederick Ormond, and one or two exceedingly studious and earnest New England maiden ladies, converts to the Faith, held membership in both; but these were considered eccentric by the rest of the Daughters.

All of our friends of the Whist Club had sought

admission into the Daughters of St. Paula, because of its reputation as a very exclusive society. To be sure the membership fee of ten dollars a year for associate members, that is, those who were excused from writing essays, was rather in the nature of a prohibitory tariff, but the ladies of the Whist Club all could afford it, and all were voted in.

CHAPTER II.

BUT MOST A WOMAN.

MRS. RAY was especially concerned as to new people, on the matter of family.

Hence she consulted with Mrs. Willow, who alone had antecedent knowledge of Miss Ward, before committing herself to any advance to the latter lady.

Mrs. Willow's information was, in the main, reassuring.

Yes; she had known Miss Ward off and on for a good many years; long before she ever dreamed they would be both in this city together.

Respectable family? Oh, yes, and rich at one time. Father and mother really quite presentable people. All the girls went to school at Brentwood; the oldest in Mrs. Willow's own time, Esther eight or ten years later.

Why, Mrs. Ray must have known Esther herself!

Come to think of it, Mrs. Ray did remember a girl named Ward, who used to have a master from the city for painting, who was bright in most of her studies, and took nearly all the prizes.

But Mother Margaret Mary and Sister Josephine

would remember what wasn't clear in Mrs. Ray's mind.

What became of the rest of the family? Died off, mostly. There had been reverses. Esther gave lessons until she had got money enough to go abroad to study; or, perhaps, there was a little saved from the wreck. Mrs. Willow wasn't sure.

She believed there were two brothers left, one older and one younger than Esther. She had heard that one of them was dissipated.

"But then, my dear," she added, "lots of men are."

"Yes," assented Mrs. Ray, "and if they drink their own money I don't know that it's anyone's business."

"We must be charitable," said Mrs. Willow, virtuously. "Of course you'll never mention it. The poor girl has enough to contend with in making her way in this cold place."

Parenthetically, Mrs. Ray never did mention it except to her husband and her favorite sister-in-law, and Mrs. Martin and Mrs. Macduff, all of whom she charged to keep it to themselves.

"But Esther Ward is all right herself," continued Mrs. Willow, "and her pictures are perfectly lovely, and she earns enough of money by them to get along with. Her studio is in a nice part of the city, and I've been to see her twice, and had her over to the house last Sunday."

It must be said for Mrs. Willow that she was kind-hearted, and had a good deal of feeling for "Auld Lang Syne."

Mrs. Ray, after further reassurance from Mother Margaret Mary, and having ascertained that the Fathers at St. Loyola's knew favorably of Miss Ward and her work, expressed a willingness that she should be presented to her one day when they met at the convent.

Miss Ward was introduced to Mrs. Jones on the same occasion.

The latter essayed at once the part of a patroness. Who could tell but that Miss Ward might yet amount to something?

"You know I am going to have a few friends next Thursday evening," said Mrs. Jones to Mrs. Ray as they started for home, "and I'm thinking I'll ask Miss Ward. She can stay all night with us. She's alone in the world, and it will be a charity to show her a little attention. I suppose she lives miserably, all cluttered up in her studio, and hardly ever has a comfortable meal. That's the way with lots of those artist-folks."

Mrs. Jones was, however, destined to a great surprise; for Esther politely declined her invitation, on the plea of a previous engagement. Later, the elder lady with persistent intent at lofty patronage visited her studio to arrange for a portrait of her niece.

"Of course I wouldn't expect to pay much to an

amateur like you, Miss Ward, but I like your work; I think there's a good deal in you, and I'd like to help you along."

"But, dear madame," said Miss Ward pleasantly, "I've really more orders on hand than I can fill for many months."

The artist never dreamed that Mrs. Jones meant to patronize her. She saw in the pompous, over-dressed woman before her merely a purse-proud, underbred person, for whose deficiencies she felt compassion, tempered with a little amusement.

"Do you think I believed her?" said Mrs. Jones later, in the privacy of her own sitting-room. "Not I! Oh, she's a haughty minx, she is! But pride goes before a fall, especially empty pride like that one's, without a dollar behind it!"

Thenceforward Mrs. Jones was the sternest critic of the artist and the woman; while Esther, most happy in that she

> "Lived with visions for her company,
> Instead of men and women,"

recked not she had given umbrage to Mrs. Jones, nor that a question could be raised as to her fitness for the best socially that the new city of her home could give her.

For was she not always in the best society? familiar with the mind and soul of Michael Angelo and Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci, of Giotto, Murillo, Fra Angelico, of Pinturicchio and Perugino;

of Tintoretto, Titian, Vandyke, Rubens, and all the splendid galaxy, who have strengthened earthly eyes, be it ever so little, for the glories which will flash upon them in the anterooms of heaven?

Could she not have told you the loves and losses, the labors and triumphs of all their lives?

She was well versed in the literature of art, and in the poetry, old and new, which is food for art.

And in this glorious company, in every one of whom after the trial of time only what is high-minded and heavenly of virtue, honor, and good report survives, her mind enlarged, her heart grew deep and tender, and she had thoughts that she expressed only in her pictures, or whispered to a certain little portrait which was curtained all day long, and unveiled only when she was absolutely secure from further interruption and ready to light her blessed candles for her night prayers.

From all of which you will note again, dear reader, that pride of intellect on which I must insist once-more, as a fault of Esther Ward's; also a secretiveness that can hardly be commended; and an obtuseness to the condescension of her social superiors in a circle where rank was very largely determined by money.

But Esther, reverent-minded, hero-worshipping, and unworldly though she was, never in her life had the consciousness of a social superior.

However, with it all, and despite Mrs. Jones' dis-

approval, our artist had her great successes at the New York Exhibition and our own.

In several of the society journals soon following, her name was seen among such a galaxy of notables at Mrs. Jameson-Tyndall's "at home," that the most carping in our set were completely satisfied as to her fitness for recognition; and thenceforward Miss Ward had more friendly calls, more cards for afternoon teas, more invitations to dinner parties and dances, than two of her could have managed with exclusive devotion to the social side of life.

Even with the most delicate diplomacy — for she appreciated all these evidences of friendly interest — Esther found it hard to save her working hours, and not seem churlish.

After all, the success in her art was the supreme thing; she had served too long and laboriously for it to imperil it for a lesser good. Still it was sweet to be sought, to be made much of, to be compelled to realize that the artist had not absorbed all of the woman, and that she was still capable of a fresh and frank enjoyment of the pleasures which she had had to forego in the season for which they had been fittest.

Esther was in some respects the most womanly of women. Though her girlhood was past she had still the youth of bright eyes, unwrinkled skin, abundant tresses, and the physical and mental elasticity which is a woman's best strength. She

walked with a girlish quickness and spring; and worked with energy and delight, moving to a climax ardent, breathless and decisive; and "subsiding," as she would put it, at the twilight hour in a delicious languor, fairer visions than she ever hoped to embody, glowing against the dusk before her tired eyes.

In that dusk hour, too, she opened the deep locket which hung by a slender gold chain about her neck, and thought happily of the day when that which it enshrined would glow in its place, beheld and understood by new friends and old.

. . . . . .

These were, on the whole, bright days for Esther Ward. Comparatively young, interesting, if not fair to look upon, with a simple, sincere good-will to others, and the ability to please without fawning or cringing, successful in the work of her choice, she found herself, after but a brief sojourn in her new abode, encompassed by the love and honor and troops of friends which are usually the portion of those to the manor born, or won by a much longer career of fortune and service than had been hers.

Then over it all was the foregleam of the dearer and sweeter joy expected.

Of course there were shadows, anxieties, a strong compelling motive for hard work and good money returns — but these things had been for many years, and now the difficulties that could not be denied were at least more easily dealt with.

Yes, life was fair in these days; it was good to see the sun, and the bread of honest toil had a sweet savor.

For one with such past experiences as had been crowded into Esther's still short life, fortune seemed almost too kind.

She said so one day to an artist friend with whom she was on those comradely terms into which Mrs. Jones thought she drifted too readily with persons of the opposite sex. But they had been fellow-students in Rome, and were now fellow-workers in the American home of culture and learning.

"Don't worry, my gentle gazelle. At this very moment, when apparently you are on the crest of the wave of success in your art and popularity in 'sassiety,' some one up in an attic or down in a cellar is saying: 'Oh, if these people knew what I know about Esther Ward!'"

Esther laughed lightly. She was used to her old comrade's badinage.

But almost instantly a faint shudder passed over her.

"Why, Esther, you don't mind?" he said, noticing her sudden pallor under his laughing eyes.

"Oh, no, indeed," she answered, recovering herself; "I felt a slight chill — am I in a draft? I hardly ever know when I am," and she moved a few steps, and turned her face a little from her friend's searching but kindly gaze.

"Don't you know the old superstition? Tennyson speaks of it in 'Guinevere':

'I shudder: some one steps across my grave!'

"Esther Ward! if you weren't the strongest, most level-headed woman I know, I should say you were getting morbid. . . . By the way, this is a tremendous picture of yours — he was standing now before 'The Forsaken Christ,' which he had turned so that a splendid light fell upon it. To think that it should meet so much less favor than that pretty triviality, 'The Moss Rose Bud!'"

Esther was silent, scrutinizing her own work, as was her wont, with rigorous eyes.

"It is the truth of its awful sadness and desolation that's against it. I suppose," resumed her friend, "people want you to make them feel good to themselves, whether you are a painter of pictures, or a singer of songs, or a teller of stories. They know that sorrow is dogging their steps. They want you so to charm them through their eyes or ears that they won't hear its footfalls. They know that there is a Gethsemane and a flight of summer friends in every adult life; that your Christ" —

"Your Christ! Oh, you miserable Unitarian!" cried Esther. "Where were you this moment but for Him?"

"Softly, softly! I didn't mean to rouse the slumbering Katherine of Alexandria!"

"Yes, she was a martyr for Christ's divinity; I'm glad you know that," said Esther, with a new light in her eyes.

"Oh, I know many a thing that I don't get the credit of," he answered lightly; "but I know this also: that I never look at that steadfast face and those bound hands without thinking of Browning's lines:

> 'I go in the rain, and more than needs
> A rope cut both my wrists behind;
> And I think by the feel, my forehead bleeds —
> For they fling, whoever has a mind,
> Stones at me' —

"There you are again, as if our Lord were a sort of a glorified national leader, instead of the Saviour of the world — as if politics" —

"Politics were in the minds of his persecutors," said the man gravely; "but dear little woman, essence of orthodoxy, don't let us quarrel. I'd give ten years of the life that probably remains for me, to have your faith; and if I can't *yet* accept Christ as you do, is it nothing that I bow down before Him as I can accept him? that I can take in some sort the message of the picture which your faith has enabled you to make? I wonder of all who will see it, in time to come, if any will feel more than I, that it was painted for a soul bereft!"

And with a long, reverent look at the sad, steadfast face of the pictured Christ, he turned abruptly to leave the studio.

"Won't you say 'good-by,' Jack?"

"Good-by, Esther," he said, clasping for an instant the firm little fingers.

She remained where he had left her, before the picture; but she was thinking of herself, not of Jack Holmwood.

"Oh, what if I have painted it for myself!" she said, with a longer and colder shudder.

Just then Mrs. Mint came in.

Mrs. Mint was not of a cultivated mind, but she respected Esther as a woman making her way in the world by her honest labor.

Had she not done so herself in by-gone days, albeit on a lower line of effort? So a fellow-feeling made her kind.

Then she gratefully remembered Esther's fidelity in the day of seeming adverse fortune.

Moreover, it delighted her soul to see Esther's obliviousness to Mrs. Jones' attempts at patronage, and to the social lines drawn in our set.

Mrs. Mint had ordered replicas of "Christ Resting in Bethany" for the chapels of two charitable institutions of which she was a generous patroness, and paid for them to Esther a price at which the latter protested.

"It's all right. I know a good thing when I see it," said the elder woman, with brusque good nature. But she would not look twice at "The Forsaken Christ."

"It gives me cold chills!" she said to her faithful Martha.

"It's the best thing she's ever done, ma'am," responded the latter.

"I wish that little woman hadn't fallen in with those Whist Club people," said Mrs. Mint irrelevantly. "Esther Ward is no more fit to deal with the women of that crowd than a child of five would be. She sees things straight, to begin with,— what none of them do; and she tells them straight, if she speaks at all,— what none of them can. Then she's living in Heaven, or in Greece, or Rome, or some outlandish place, most of the time, and she doesn't know what people on earth are thinking or planning about. And the worst of it is, she believes every one is as good as herself about minding her own business. I can't imagine how a woman can come to her time of life with so little worldly sense."

"Quite so, ma'am; but poets and artists aren't folks."

"I suppose not, Martha. Think of that girl wanting to share all she possessed with me, when everyone else had turned away. Oh, of course I don't forget the Ormonds, who asked me to make their house my home as long as I might need to. But Esther risked more even than they."

"Quite so, ma'am," assented Martha.

Mrs. Mint was no fool. Indeed, her hard business sense is said to have been the cornerstone of

the edifice of the late Mr. Mint's colossal fortune. Sometimes with her intimates she was not averse to displaying herself and her late liege lord as a self-made couple, reasonably proud of their job.

She had a grim humor of her own which she sometimes indulged in her confidential chats with Martha Cutts, the humble but helpful companion of the years of her rising fortunes. Mrs. Cutts was a widow of mixed Irish and English ancestry, who had seen better days, but had the good judgment not to obtrude them unduly on those who had seen worse.

She knew by a modest personal experience the way of life among gentle folk in the Old World, and she was young enough and shrewd enough on her coming to America to grasp the social conditions here, and find her advantage, without falling into the mistake common to some well-born Old World people, of disparaging us Americans for our social deflections from their ideal.

She had been invaluable to Mrs. Mint, as Mrs. Mint had been invaluable to her; and the two were on terms of unclouded good comradeship, although Mrs. Cutts attended her employer's social functions simply as an adjunct of the dressing-room. But fortunate, indeed, is a hostess like Mrs. Mint, with her other self in that place of pre-eminent advantage for character study.

CHAPTER III.

THE SUCCEEDING OF SUCCESS.

MRS. MINT estimated our artist fairly. Esther was a poor judge of character.

It was not that she lacked the prompt instincts for or against people which most women have for their protection.

But she had a reasonable mind and a delicate conscience, and she feared that forbidding instincts might be rash judgments. In any event, she felt obliged to verify them by giving the person against whom they pointed a warning finger, the benefit of the doubt.

Why should she not think as well of this one or that, who came to her with fair words or kindly overtures, as she would have them think of her, were the case reversed?

To be sure, a woman who worked from necessity could not be intimate nor even friendly with everyone, however agreeable, who sought her.

To be sure, the question of congeniality must regulate even the offered associations that were most insistent. But how kind of these people to seek a comparative stranger with such unwearying evidence of good will!

Even Mrs. Jones meant well. It was a pity her early education had been neglected; otherwise she had not so underrated the things of the mind, nor set such extravagant value on the crudest external evidences of wealth, thought Esther.

Mrs. Jones and she had no interests in common to bridge the difference in their years, nor had the former pressed her advances after the first attempts at patronage, which Esther, differently understanding, had declined, but not resented.

Thus was the younger woman free from all need of regulating an intercourse which had been little to her taste, at best.

Their casual meetings, however, at the Daughters of St. Paula, or at the houses of the acquaintances whom they soon possessed in common, invariably had a depressing influence on Esther.

"What has that woman against me?" she often asked herself, innocent as she was of offense. And then, "Why should she have aught against me? Esther Ward, you are making too much of yourself. She doesn't think of you at all."

So when circumstances brought them together, however disagreeable the elder woman's bearing, Esther's manner was invariably marked with the gentle deference to riper years, and the ready yielding of opinion on indifferent matters, which she manifested to Mrs. Mint, or, for that matter, to poor old Madame Vargous, a lady of distinguished mem-

ories but fallen fortunes, whom Mrs. Jones had dubbed "The Great Has Been."

On other basis, however, was the artist's intercourse with Mrs. Willow.

Mrs. Willow, indeed, since Esther's work had been so widely praised, and since Esther herself had become a person of interest to the editors of art notes and the sketchers of celebrities, would have had her at all her functions in the role of rising star.

She was proud of having made of Esther before the latter's notable success; and, in her absence, sometimes boasted of having discovered her.

In her presence, however, she attempted no patronage. There was something about Esther of reserve and native independence, even in her gayest and friendliest hour, which slightly overawed Mrs. Willow.

Then it was useless to try to interest the artist in society news. She never could supplement a dainty bit of gossip with additional details — despite all the people she knew and the things she *must* hear, if she paid the least attention.

Reflecting whereon, Mrs. Willow came to the conclusion that those Daughters of St. Paula who thought Esther a little stupid, outside of her art, were perfectly right.

Indeed, she herself had often marvelled at the things which went on at the very meetings of the

Daughters, right under Esther's eyes, and which she never noticed.

Doubtless it was a good fault. Esther at least was a safe, if not a responsive, confidante ; she never seemed to remember a bit of news over night.

There was another nice thing about Esther, too. She was blankly indifferent to Mrs. Willow's widower brother. This might not seem to the world in general so remarkable as it seemed to Mrs. Willow. Even Mrs. Jones had never intimated that Esther's occasional appearance at Mrs. Willow's Sunday afternoons or evenings was even remotely affected by the probable presence of Henry Graham.

For this considerateness Mrs. Willow meant to reward Esther in due time, by promoting her acquaintance with some well-to-do man who could give her a good home. She had her doubts, of course, as to whether women like Esther Ward or Miss Ruth May would make desirable wives; for artists and literary people are so very peculiar. Still, women had to take some risks in marriage. Why shouldn't the men take some?

So the fact remained that Esther, if a little dull in social matters, was not a designing woman; that she was no enemy of the prospects of Mr. Graham's affectionate nieces and nephews; that she was a drawing card in Mrs. Willow's salon, inasmuch as she was both a good talker and a good listener, and was

becoming more and more of a personage whom people liked to meet, and whom it was well to be in with.

Then Mrs. Walter Wise didn't in the least resent her. Of course Esther never could be to Mrs. Willow just what Mrs. Wise was, and Mrs. Wise knew it.

Finally Mrs. Willow and Mrs. Wise both really liked Esther; and though in private they and Mrs. Ray sometimes laughed a little over this or that evidence of her slowness "to catch on to things," as they phrased it, still Esther might have heard their discussions with no feeling save a mild wonder at the interest of three adult women with homes, husbands and children to take care of, in matters so remote from their own business and bosoms.

Once the ice — of whose chilly vicinage Esther had been unconscious — had been broken between herself and Mrs. Ray, they found some common ground.

It had been proved by the testimony of Mother Margaret Mary and Sister Josephine that they had been contemporary convent girls, though not classmates, at Brentwood; and this alone, as all convent-bred women know, is a powerful help to friendship.

To be sure Mrs. Ray — because Esther was rather indistinct in her own retrospect, and also because she was anxious to be reckoned for as long as possible among the youngest of the matrons in our set — would have it that our artist must have been a pos-

tulant, or at least a parlor boarder, with intention of entering the novitiate.

But when this notion, which was fast assuming the character of a fixed idea in Mrs. Ray's mind and on her tongue, reached Sister Josephine, that good lady, who had an uncomfortably long and infallible memory, and who had kept the school-register, assured Mrs. Ray, in presence of several other old alumnæ, that Esther was exactly four years younger than herself, although in schooldays in more advanced classes.

On this Mrs. Ray abandoned the trail of a possible religious novitiate, in her casual explorations of Esther's past, with a celerity beautiful to witness.

She did not avenge this annoying incident on Esther, however, as some less devout woman might have done.

Mrs. Ray, though slower than several of our set to yield to Esther's undeniable attraction, and less impressed by the verdict of what some of them called "Protestant society," had finally come to like our artist for herself.

Mrs. Ray was as willing as Mrs. Jones to play the part of patroness, and as anxious to do it with little or no financial expenditure. But she was more modern and better tempered than Mrs. Jones, and her patronage, therefore, was in a less offensive spirit, though it threatened at one time embarrassing possibilities for Esther.

For example, in the beginning of their friendship Mrs. Ray had matured a plan for soliciting orders in the convents and among the clergy for Esther, on the plea of helping "a struggling artist," (for to Mrs. Ray equally with Mrs. Jones everyone who earned her living, especially in the fine arts, was necessarily poor and struggling,) but Esther discovered the plan in time, and showed such unfeigned dismay and such a list of waiting commissions, that Mrs. Ray abandoned for the time her attempt at vicarious benevolence to aspiring genius.

"But her intentions were good," said Esther, addressing the mysterious portrait, now unveiled for the delight of her solitude, "and if I had been in need of work, I've no doubt her good word would have helped me greatly. She was — yes — really — a little officious; but how could she know? Perhaps she is right in chiding me for being too quiet about my commissions; but it seems to me in the worst of taste to force affairs of this kind on my friends' notice. What do you think, dear? I'm sure you would not wish me to do differently."

The pictured eyes seemed to look a bright approval; and Esther, satisfied on that score, but fearing she had failed in appreciation of Mrs. Ray's kind intent, wrote a very friendly note promising to come in at her next Day, sent it out for the midnight mail, and fell asleep at peace with herself and all the world.

CHAPTER IV.

OUR WHIST CLUB KEEPS LENT.

"I DON'T feel quite right about having our Whist Club meet in Lent." It was Mrs. Ray who spoke, and she was the president for the year.

"I'd like to know why not; it isn't a sin to play whist in Lent," retorted Mrs. Jones.

"I know that," rejoined Mrs. Ray, puckering her large white forehead in perplexity; "but it doesn't seem just the thing. There's the company, after the games, and the refreshments, and"—

"Well, nobody made an evening affair of it and asked the gentlemen, except you and Mrs. Willow," put in Mrs. Macduff.

"Mrs. Mint used to," said Mrs. Wise wistfully.

A slight shadow fell on the little company. There was a general painful consciousness of a multitude of good times forfeited by sheer stupidity; but there was also a tacit agreement to divide the blame and ignore it.

"I don't think any of us are bound to fast," ventured Mrs. Martin.

"But we ought to do something," said Mrs. Ray, who was really a well-intentioned woman, and

devout in her way. "Father Drane's sermon last Sunday scared me. Perhaps some of us could fast if we tried."

"Yes, I suppose we ought to do something," echoed Mrs. Willow.

"I'm going to the Daughters of St. Paula every week," announced Mrs. Ray in a tone of determination, which proved that she was not to be turned from at least one penitential practice befitting the season.

Mrs. Wise, who had a keen sense of humor which it sometimes sorely taxed her diplomacy to keep in check, bit her lip hard.

"I'll go, too," declared Mrs. Willow. "Won't you, Sister Wise?"

"Why, certainly," said the lady appealed to; "though I must confess I rather enjoy the meetings."

This with delicate deference, as if she were acknowledging some morbid fancy in food.

"Well, I don't," frankly admitted Mrs. Ray; "though of course it's [the thing to belong to the Daughters of St. Paula.

"Nor I, either," said Mrs. Macduff. "And," waxing bolder, "I'm almost afraid of Miss May. What is it we're on now, anyhow?"

"The Ten Persecutions of the Early Christians," answered Mrs. Martin, promptly.

"Oh, yes! well, at the last meeting she was talking about St. Peter — oh, was it St. Paul? Well, it's much the same thing; they're always talked about together. Well, as I was saying, she was talking about St. Peter and St. Paul, and I was away back, sitting next to Mrs. Forde. We hadn't seen each other for ever so long, and she was telling me about her sister, Mrs. Allison, and the last baby — oh, you never heard of such a case! — and we really neither of us noticed that Miss May had got started. Well, she paused, and then I noticed, and thought she'd forgotten something. But we didn't think it had anything to do with us. Then in another minute she came to a dead standstill and looked straight ahead — that aggravating way she has; till half a dozen of the members looked over in our direction. We'd been talking very low, and bothering nobody. I think she's perfectly horrid. Don't you?"— to Mrs. Wise.

Now Mrs. Wise thought the lady in question was perfectly right, and would love to have said so; but Mrs. Macduff was one of her patronesses and Miss May was not. Then the absent are always wrong, as the French have it. But she compromised.

"Miss May is, well, a little peculiar. All the old New England families are."

"Well, it's horrid to be peculiar," said Mrs. Ray; "but I suppose it would be good for us all to learn something about the martyrs. It's going to be my

practice for this Lent, anyway. But about having our whist during Lent."

"We might put it to a vote," suggested Mrs. Martin.

"Yes; let us. Oh, I heard that Mrs. Mint has paid off the mortgage on St. Mary's Orphanage. Of course, though, she can well afford to."

"She's not bashful about telling she did it," snapped Mrs. Jones.

"Mrs. Ormond told me," said Mrs. Wise.

"Mrs. Ormond is just like Esther Ward; she thinks it's awful to go to the theatre or to parties in Lent," said Mrs. Martin.

"The airs of that woman!" exclaimed Mrs. Jones.

"Just because her husband wrote a book!" said Mrs. Martin, sympathetically.

"He's written four books," corrected Mrs. Ray, who felt a possible patroness's obligation to uphold her especial literary man.

"Well, what of it?" asked Mrs. Jones impatiently. "Anyone might write a book, if they'd put in the stuff that some folks do. Now there's Miss May's book"—

"Sh—h—!" said Mrs. Wise, for Miss May was the president and bright particular star of the Daughters of St. Paula, and some of her satellites were within hearing.

Mrs. Wise had never been guilty of kicking anyone who was up.

"But Mr. Ormond's books are good — my husband says so. I never have read any of them myself, but my sister has told me the plot of them all, and they're awfully 'cute.' Just like what happens."

"But *she* does not write books!" persisted Mrs. Jones, bitterly. "Who is she, anyhow? She used to live out in Groveland, and they say she taught in a country school."

"But she's a Daughter of St. Paula," said Mrs. Macduff, feebly.

"I wonder how she ever manages the dues. Those literary people are poorer than church mice," said Mrs. Jones.

"My husband says Mr. Ormond is bound to rise, and some of them really do make a living. There's Mr. Howells, you know," said Mrs. Ray, "and Mr. Crawford. Then she's a great scholar" —

"Well, what does she know except what was already in books, for anyone to learn before she learned it?" persisted Mrs. Jones. "Now if she had found out something that no one ever knew — isn't that so?"

No one was quite ready for this view of the case.

"The old New England families are so queer," said Mrs. Wise, vaguely. "Lots of Miss May's folks are High Church Episcopalians, and they're awfully strict about Lent."

"It wouldn't be right for us to be easier than they are," said Mrs. Ray. "Weren't we going to vote about it?"

The vote was taken, and stood eight to four for dropping whist during Lent; and Mrs. Ray attended six consecutive meetings of the Daughters of St. Paula without flinching.

CHAPTER V.

THE LADIES AND THE LION.

Miss May had secured a real Lion for the Easter entertainment of the Daughters of St. Paula. He was great; he was high-priced; he was hard to get at any price; still more important, he was fashionable. His name was known the minute it was spoken, not only in the most fashionable circles in the city of Miss May's home, but in vastly more fashionable circles in every city of the land, and in many lands.

How did Miss May get him? Nobody knew. Miss May had no confidantes. Perhaps that was why she had always heretofore got for herself or her good works, anything she had set her heart on.

At the special meeting called early in Lent for the making of the necessary arrangements, the Daughters were in a flutter of pleasurable excitement.

"We shall have the entertainment in the evening, in Loyola Hall," announced Miss May.

Mrs. Willow was up like a flash.

"Oh, Miss May, do you really think that is best? Wouldn't it be better to charge a little more, and

have it in the Diamond Drawing-rooms? They're so pretty."

"Yes, indeed, Miss May, we would all be willing to dispose of tickets at five dollars apiece, to have it there," added Mrs. Jones.

"If it is in Loyola Hall everybody can come," objected Mrs. Ray.

"I want everybody to come," said the president of the Daughters of St. Paula, calmly.

"I know some lovely people who would pay high for tickets if everybody wasn't to be admitted," urged Mrs. Ray.

"With 'everybody' there the loveliest will be included," rejoined this aggravating president.

"But I thought anything *we* were to have was to be kept just among ourselves," complained Mrs. Martin.

"So it is," responded Miss May, benignly. "Just among us Catholics; that is," with dancing eyes, "unless some of our Protestant friends, drawn by the shining of our Star, should entreat the privilege of tickets."

"Entreat — the — privilege — Protestants!" gasped little Mrs. Martin, who regarded our separated brethren, socially speaking, as superior beings."

"Miss May is *so* peculiar," sighed Mrs. Ray.

"If she goes on like this, one might as well belong to the Aubrey de Vere Reading Circle," whispered Mrs. Wise; and she was about to relate

some enormity of democracy committed by this association, when Miss May tapped for order.

"The lecture will take place on the evening of Thursday in Easter week, in Loyola Hall, at popular prices, fifty cents a ticket. The secretary and the treasurer will distribute to each her share; *money* to be given in therefor two weeks before the lecture."

Miss May was a bit of a czar. She believed she had to be.

Mrs. Willow had a hospitable heart. She also had her Day.

In this she was not unusual. Every member of the Whist Club, most of the married and a few of the unmarried, Daughters of St. Paula had their Days.

The latest matron in the set to take a Day, had severely reprimanded her oldest lad for saying with levity:

"Why, there ain't enough Days to go 'round!"

But Mrs. Willow had chosen her Day wisely. She was "at home" from four o'clock Sunday afternoon.

It was well known to the intimates of her house that a delightful high tea was served at half-past six, and there were dainty refreshments again at half-past ten.

Mrs. Willow had a clever husband, and, as we have seen, a widower brother who resided with them, and was reputed to be rich.

With such attractions, it is not strange that her Day was a success.

The men could come, and did come, as they came to no other Day; and while these were relaxing their minds she got many a choice bit of news, to say nothing of the very cream of current events from the ladies.

Well stored thus early in the week, she made it a conscientious duty to look in on all the Days of all her friends; nor was she niggard in dispensing her early-hived treasures of information.

Now it was her dear delight to have as many celebrities as possible at her Days.

When, therefore, she heard of this phenomenal Lion secured by Miss May, and certain to be in town (as he had distinguished relatives) over Sunday, she bent all her mind to the achievement of him for her guest.

To Mrs. Wise alone did she confide her ambition. She knew she was perfectly safe in so doing, as that lady always assisted her on Sundays, and would thus come in for a much larger share of reflected glory than she could get in any other way.

"Fortunately, I'm on the Reception Committee," murmured Mrs. Wise.

"How will that help?" queried her friend.

"Don't you see? We're going to have an informal reception after the lecture, and you can trust me to see that you are presented one of the very first — ahead of Mrs. Jones, anyhow."

"So you can. Now do it like an angel, and I'll never forget it to you."

"Mrs. Jones is quite counting on him. Says she used to know him; had luncheon with him once in Rome."

"Do you believe her?"

"Well, you never can tell," answered Mrs. Wise, cautiously. "Anyhow, trust me to see that she doesn't get the best of us at the reception. Oh, you're going to Benediction! Well, I'll go right along, too. Dear me, it's good the Whist and so many other things are off for Lent. One really should do something for one's poor little soul."

. . . . . .

The eventful evening of the Lion's appearance under the patronage of the Daughters of St. Paula had come. And everybody had come. The hall was packed to discomfort. Extra rows of chairs had to be put in, until there was scarcely a hand's breadth between the stage and the nearest auditors.

The popular prices had not dismayed "the lovely people" of Mrs. Ray's desire; and Mrs. Martin, surveying the hall anxiously from the wings, was reassured by discerning a number of her Protestant acquaintances, and four Protestant clergymen, the latter in the front row.

The Reception Committee, all in pretty demi-toilette, awaited the Lion in the little reception-room to the rear of the great hall.

"You might have knocked me over with a feather," whispered Mrs. Wise to Mrs. Willow,

getting a firm grip of her the moment the lecturer descended from the stage, for the little reception.

"Who should walk in with him and Miss May, but Mr. and Mrs. Ormond. It appears they all dined together at Miss May's."

But Mrs. Willow and everyone else had seen the entrance of the party, for they had to be admitted into the hall by the private door near the stage, and all the Daughters of St. Paula, at least, knew the significance of their association.

Miss May and the presiding officer had taken up their station beside the lecturer, and the Auxiliary Bishop, the Vicar-General, the President of Loyola College, the Protestant clergymen, the professors of the Seminary, and the senior class of Madame Grandin's finishing school, were being conceded the right of way, to offer their congratulations to the Lion.

Mrs. Wise, who was slender and agile, had towed her friend into a good position right behind Madame Grandin's seven seniors. But behind themselves pressed a serried mass of people, extending straight to the entrance, and getting steady reinforcements from the galleries.

"Just look at that, will you! Mr. and Mrs. Ormond are receiving with them!" exclaimed Mrs. Willow.

"Yes, and he's calling Mr. Ormond 'Fred.' You never can tell anything about these literary

and artistic people," rejoined Mrs. Wise. "Look at Esther Ward now! And by the way, I see her ahead of us, with Mrs. Mint."

They did not know that Mrs. Jones was close behind them with her husband. Mr. Willow always fled the receptions, and was now having a cigar with his like-minded brother-in-law in the lower hall.

Presently Mrs. Wise, descrying a break in the ecclesiastical group, literally pulled in her friend and presented her.

"And now, dear Mr. Stoneford," laying a detaining hand on the Lion's coat-sleeve (for she had had quite a chat with him in the parlor, and the emergency excused a little unconventionality), "Mrs. Willow wants a word with you."

"Very happy, indeed," murmured the Lion.

"Won't you come for half an hour to us on Sunday afternoon, my Day, you know? Mr. Willow will be so charmed."

"Quite too kind, Mrs. Willow. I'm to have luncheon on Sunday with my old friends, Mr. and Mrs. Ormond. I have no engagement in the late afternoon, but"—

"Oh, no buts, Mr. Stoneford," urged Mrs. Willow and Mrs. Wise together. "Do say you *will* come. We are on East Avenue, just next"—

There were unmistakable signs of impatience in the people right behind, and Miss May looked nervous.

The Lion surrendered at discretion.

"I'll come in about four o'clock, Mrs. Willow."

"Sure!"

"On my word."

"Oh, thank you so much!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Willow," said the gallant Lion.

Mrs. Jones had heard it all, and grasped the little plot. But she gave no sign. She and her liege lord were the next presented, and she took advantage of the opportunity only to say quite loud:

"How splendidly you look. Ah! how many things have happened since our delightful little luncheon at Albano, three years ago!"

"Quite so," said the Lion, kindly but vaguely, endeavoring to recall the circumstance.

Mrs. Jones was fairly dragged out of the throng by her impatient husband, and the real work of the evening began.

The line was thenceforth blocked every minute and a half by some one endeavoring to make an engagement with the Lion, or asking him to elucidate mysteries remaining in his lastest novel; or if they were going to be explained in the sequel; or how he first thought of becoming a Catholic; or whether he would prefer to live in Boston or New York; or what were his very lowest terms for a great charity; or if "Serena" were founded on fact; or whether it was really true that he had a little Irish blood in his veins, etc., etc., etc.

He was a very amiable Lion; and he made, I fear, some reckless promises and extraordinary explanations that night, for which he has suffered, and I hope, been forgiven.

It was the "lovely people" who pushed for conversation, and laid detaining hands upon him.

The Hon. Paul Rollins, late United States Consul-General to Paris, who presided, was thinking things behind his long blonde moustache that were not benedictions.

Miss May had all the lace ripped right off her silk skirt.

Mrs. Ormond was several times violently jammed against the platform; and in the rear of the hall it took all the tact of seven of the sweetest-tempered Daughters of St. Paula, reinforced by the good-natured officers of the Aubrey de Vere Circle, who were better used to crowds, to prevent several hundred people from "going away mad."

Meantime Mrs. Willow and Mrs. Wise, their object accomplished, had rejoined their waiting husbands, and were soon driving home in great peace and content as to their own achievement, though in much wonder about the Ormonds.

"So he's to dine with them Sunday, and they keep only one maid!" exclaimed Mrs. Willow.

"I guess it's true that Mr. Ormond is beginning to amount to something, though," said Mrs. Wise.

"Don't you think I'd better invite the Ormonds specially for Sunday?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. I don't see how you can help it."

. . . . . .

The Ormonds and their old friend, the Lion, had just finished luncheon and adjourned to their little drawing-room, whose windows commanded a view of the street.

Mrs. Ormond's eyes grew round with astonishment as Mrs. Jones' carriage drove up and stopped at her door. Mrs. Jones presently descended, and duly announced, entered the modest apartment, greeting the Ormonds with effusion, as if she were a household intimate, and not a mere acquaintance, crossing their threshold for the first time.

"And dear Mr. Stoneford! What a success the other night! All the world's agog over it."

Presently, "I suppose you are all going over to Mrs. Willow's this afternoon."

"We cannot go," said Mrs. Ormond, quietly, "but Mr. Stoneford, I believe"—

"How unfortunate! But again, what a happy thought that I called just this day; for now I can drive our friend over, as I am due there myself this afternoon."

"Quite too kind, Mrs. Jones," said the Lion, nervously, "but"—

"Oh no, indeed, no trouble at all, such a pleasure; and I have so much to ask you about our friends in Rome."

Mrs. Ormond knew that Mrs. Jones had come

far out of her way, and that the Willows lived on the other side of the city, at least five miles from the suburb of her own residence. But she was the hostess, and her experience of life had taught her the futility of opposing the will of a woman of Mrs. Jones' type.

Indeed in a very few moments the Lion, reluctantly torn from the cosy fireside of his friends, was whirling along in Mrs. Jones' carriage, which stopped before long at her own door.

"We must get Mr. Jones," she explained sweetly, and then — "better come in, Mr. Stoneford; he won't be quite ready, I fear, and I couldn't think of your waiting in the carriage even a moment, this chilly day."

So our Lion found himself in Mrs. Jones' gorgeous drawing-room, and thence, in a moment, in her equally gorgeous dining-room, where there was no escape from a glass of champagne and a cigar with Mr. Jones.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Willow's Day had never drawn so many guests before. Between ourselves, she had written to everyone who was on visiting terms with her, to be sure and come.

So it befell that all the members of the Whist Club, and many of the Daughters of St. Paula, with their complaisant husbands, brothers, and even, in a few cases, sons, were gathered together.

As we have said, Mrs. Willow was fortunate in her Day, as her own men were at home for the Day of Rest, and other men, even of a less social type, could plead fewer excuses against such informal sociability as prevailed at her house.

The hostess, attended by Mrs. Wise, was stationed near the drawing-room door, as the steady stream of arrivals demanded. But the Lion came not. It was after five o'clock. What could have happened?

"Ah, dear Mrs. Willow! So pleased to see you! I have brought you Mr. Stoneford; we've just come from the house. He and Mr. Jones have been renewing old times together, for a few moments!"

It was indeed Mrs. Jones, convoying the captured Lion, and posing before the whole gathering as his old and intimate friend, to whom Mrs. Willow was doubtless indebted for the honor of his presence at this moment.

The Lion himself was bewildered. Unprofessionally, he was as little up to the ways of women as any other masculine creature, but he vaguely felt a discomfort in the air, and threw an extra cordiality into his greeting to the Willows and Mrs. Wise. There was no chance to explain, amid the group that promptly surrounded him, nor would he have known just what to explain, in any event.

Mrs. Jones relinquished him for a while, to disport herself with unwonted suavity among the other guests, narrating various little *bon-mots* of the Lion.

She never took her eyes off him, however, and when he showed signs of making his farewells, she and Mr. Jones were beside him, and finally carried him off in triumph before everybody's eyes, to the residence of the cousins with whom he was to pass the night.

. . . . . .

"Did you ever see anything like the effrontery of that woman?" demanded Mrs. Wise of Mrs. Willow, when all the guests had departed except a couple of old familiars who were in the library with the head of the house.

"But you promised me she wouldn't get the best of me, standing by that mantelpiece," said Mrs. Willow, reproachfully.

"What more could I do? How could I know she was going to serve us such a trick? Where in the world did she pick up with him? He was to be at Mrs. Ormond's to luncheon, and she doesn't visit there."

"So he was at the Ormond's."

"Then how in the world did Mrs. Jones get hold of him to have him at her house? The bold thing! I'd give"—

"But you promised me, standing by that mantelpiece"—

Mrs. Wise did not go home till she had soothed the fretfulness out of her disappointed friend. Both ladies united in denouncing Mrs. Jones, and made vague plans for taking her down a peg or two on

some future occasion; but both of them knew in their hearts that they would have to swallow their grievance meekly. Among them and Mrs. Jones existed, as a consequence of past intimacy, that armed neutrality which keeps the peace among women who have ceased to be fond of one another, but who have the acute consciousness of being in one another's power through imprudent revelations of their own or other people's business.

CHAPTER VI.

ANOTHER DAY.

LAST but not least of the factors in forming a friendship between Esther and Mrs. Ray were the children. Esther loved children, and was a prime favorite with the Ray boys.

She drew wonderful animals for Gregory on the fly-leaves of his private 'randum books, as he called them, and was full of compassion for the trials and tribulations of the stormy school life of a normal, freckled boy.

She delighted the gentle and rather pious Clement with stories of Old World castles and sacred shrines, and sweet legends of saints and martyrs.

Even the shy baby, Athanasius, shrinking under the shadow of his great name, would go to Esther when he wouldn't go to his own aunts.

"You had lots of children in your family?" said Mrs. Ray once, tentatively.

"Only one brother younger than myself, but too near my age for me to remember him a baby," responded Esther, turning her clear, direct gaze on her hostess.

On this especial Wednesday, Gregory, having come

home from school, and duly refreshed the inner boy downstairs, reconnoitred about the door of the rear drawing-room until he spied Esther on a divan in a corner with Madame Vargous. The latter was unfolding to her amiable, if not enthralled, listener the glories of society in Washington in the days when Mrs. Harriet Lane Johnston was the acknowledged leader.

The advance of a kindly old French Father from St. Loyola's, to whose good works Madame Vargous had been a generous benefactor in her golden prime, and who showed her the consideration so dear to her heart, in her failing days, whenever occasion offered, left Esther free to respond to the nods and becks — truth forces me to substitute frantic grimaces for the poet's wreathed smiles — of the ingenuous Gregory.

They stole unnoticed past the open doors of the front drawing-room, up the broad staircase and through the wide corridors, to the sunny, spacious nursery at the rear of the second floor.

"Say, Miss Esther," said Gregory, "wasn't you glad to get out? Oh, I wouldn't be found dead in anybody's Day."

"Hush!" whispered Esther, knocking softly at the nursery door; "perhaps the baby is asleep."

But the baby was broad awake, and with his thin little arms at once outstretched to this welcome guest, that he might nestle in that coign of vantage,

whence he might pull her locket and her loose front hair, and otherwise disport himself, as do all well-regulated babies of inquiring minds, when at ease with their friends.

Athanasius, named like his brothers for the saint of his birthday, was "Nate" to the boys in the presence of their father, but "the Kid" on all occasions of less formality.

He thrived but slowly, in comparison with his predecessors in the cradle, but made up for his small and delicate proportions by marvelous feats of agility, which made Gregory proudly declare him a "hull team," and "most as good as a circus."

Even the studious Clement, who questioned if a very obvious interest in the antics of a baby were not beneath the dignity of his twelve years, could not resist the preparations for displaying the Kid in the great act of catching his ball with his feet.

But meantime Gregory was pouring forth his joys and sorrows into the sympathetic ears of Esther.

"Oh, say, Miss Esther, call me Greg, same as the fellows do:

> 'Greg, Greg, with the wooden leg,
> Let us take him down a peg.'

That's what they call out after me when we're going home," with proud consciousness of having thus early in life lent inspiration to the gentle art of rhyme.

"It's because the man comes after us with the

carriage, Miss Esther, and I s'pose it's nothing but jealousy," said Clement, who was, I grieve to say, a bit of a snob, as nice, quiet boys sometimes are.

"Then you must disarm them, Clement, by being more friendly at recess and luncheon."

"Oh, but so few of them are of our" —

At this point the nurse had opened the big Morris chair in the center of the room, dropped Athanasius into it, and handing Esther his red-white-and-blue ball on its long ribbon, effectually diverted the conversation from the social distinctions among the boys at Professor Drummond's Preparatory School.

The baby, with alert eyes and tightly compressed lips, watched the dangling ball, and stretched hands or feet indifferently for it, as it veered now in the direction of these or those equally tenacious members.

When he caught it, as he did twice out of three times with his feet — which had not yet been trammeled by shoes — and held it up firmly clasped between the soles thereof for a moment, the boys fairly howled their applause, and the young acrobat himself, relaxing the dignity of his countenance a little, displayed his four new teeth in a condescending smile, and beat a tattoo with his heels on the leather cushions.

Tired of the ball game, he obligingly put his toes in his mouth, and eventually each of his tough little heels in turn.

The boys suggested to Esther that it would be

fine to have his picture taken with his heel in his mouth.

The artist saw æsthetic objections to this especial pose, however, which she endeavored to simplify to the boys.

It was a lovely late afternoon in May. The evening breeze was swaying the long muslin curtains at the half-open windows, through which stole the fragrance of the pear and cherry blossoms in the back garden.

"He could pick up your watch-chain with his toes," suggested Gregory, reluctant to give up the thought of perpetuating the Kid in art as a precocious athlete.

Here the interesting infant, finding conversation about him, however flattering, no adequate substitute for direct personal homage, spoke his mind vigorously in his own language.

Esther seized him and swung him to her shoulder; Gregory whistled his favorite melody, "A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight," and with his nimble toes elevating Esther's gold chain, and one hand twined in her thick brown hair, and Clement singing to his brother's whistle, the baby was having the best of good times when the door opened and the merry little group found themselves confronted with Mrs. Ray and her guests, Bertrand Coleman and his sister and Mrs. Jones.

"We knew where to find you," said Mrs. Ray.

There was laughter all round; the nurse came forward promptly to relieve Esther, but the baby screamed and clung to his favorite, and was disengaged with difficulty.

Esther with flushed cheeks and towsled hair and dancing eyes mustered what gravity she could (with Gregory's scowl at the interruption in sight) for Mr. Coleman's presentation to her; and retreated as speedily as possible to make herself tidy for the informal dinner, for which they were all hospitably bidden.

She already had a slight acquaintance with Miss Coleman, but this was her first meeting with the brother; and she laughed a little as she adjusted her hair, at the rather absurd predicament in which she had been caught.

The color was not all gone from her cheeks nor the laughter from her eyes when she rejoined the company in the dining-room; and Bertrand Coleman, who liked bright new faces, was glad to have her for his *vis-a-vis*.

The conversation never languished where he was a guest, as he was up in all the events of the day, and had an inexhaustible store of incident and anecdote; and he noted with approval that Esther listened intently and intelligently.

He was used to having women listen to him, but they often missed the point, and asked incredibly stupid explanations.

And even beauty could not atone to Mr. Coleman for stupidity.

Moreover, there was a something in the eyes which met his so straightforwardly when he addressed a remark to their owner, which attracted him pleasantly, but not sentimentally.

It was not the woman's homage to the man (much as he was sought after by women, he had the good sense to see this), it was the artist's appreciation of a subject; for Bertrand Coleman was a splendid and distinguished type of manhood.

Fairly tall, well-built, of erect, soldierly bearing, free of superfluous flesh, clear-cut in feature, swarthy as a Spaniard, with deep-set, dark gray eyes — "the kind that must shine in the dark," as the Ray boys said — abundant, soft black hair, without a tinge of gray, for all of his forty-five years, he was a man that the most unobservant would have to look at twice, and that artists would long to paint, some for a Lancelot, others for a Godfrey de Bouillon.

. . . . . .

"He's nice, isn't he?" asked Mrs. Ray of Esther, as she took her by-and-by to her own room, to put on her hat and gloves.

"Nice!" exclaimed Esther. "He's magnificent. He's about the height and build of my older brother, and dark like him, but, oh, incomparably better-looking. He's quite the handsomest brunette man I ever saw, and clever, too. I hope I shall meet him again."

"Do you?" asked Mrs. Ray slowly, while her eyes snapped and her ears quivered; "and you'll always remember that you met him first here, won't you?"

But Esther was so absorbed in an artistic adjustment of the breast-knot of violets which little Gregory had plucked for her, that Mrs. Ray's words passed unheard.

Bertrand Coleman and his sister walked home with Esther across the park that evening.

Mrs. Jones remarked when she got home, to Mr. and Mrs. Wise, whom she found visiting with her husband, that Miss Ward was the greatest poser she had ever known; and that for her part, she thought it in questionable taste for unmarried women to make such a fuss over babies, anyhow.

I said, a little earlier in these chronicles of our set, that I wished Esther Ward had never painted Bertrand Coleman's portrait.

But really, she might have painted him ten times, and exhibited his picture as her masterpiece at Bellini & Leverett's, or anywhere else, if only a few people of ordinary communicativeness had known about that other portrait, so jealously veiled and guarded.

Look at her now for a moment in the quiet of her studio, sketching her reminiscences of the evening on a bit of Bristol board.

She has outlined Bertrand Coleman as a mediæval knight in armor, but with equal interest she has

sketched Baby Nate, with his eyes uplifted and his legs and arms in air, only she has curved and dimpled these attenuated members beyond recognition. Gregory's honest face is there in a full round, and Clement's delicate profile; nor does she lay her pencil down till Mrs. Ray, who is of a chubby, flaxen-haired, wax-doll-faced prettiness, contributes to the group another round face, whose eyes and mouth are notes of interrogation.

I wish Esther had had a confidante other than her brush or pen. She might have trusted Mrs. Ormond or Ruth May, with whom she was drifting into a very congenial acquaintanceship. She might as safely and more easily have dropped a few words to Jack Holmwood, whom she had known for ten years.

You would think that a woman who had so much to say of her thoughts and feelings on impersonal matters, would some day or other reveal a little of her own life, her heart's hopes, fears and desires; but just as soon as she lowered her voice, and said, "this is between ourselves for the present," your attention was rewarded by the highly important information that she was going to put a stained-glass window in her little dining-room, the outlook being so ugly, or some other triviality that you would have seen for yourself in a day or two.

For Esther was a home-loving creature, and "played house" in the little suite behind her studio,

with a middle-aged widow to minister to her modest wants.

If this widow had been as communicative as she was observant, she could have turned the course of events by improving the shining hour when Mrs. Willow's maid came, as she often did, with notes for Miss Ward, in that lady's absence.

Even Father Herman had said more than once to Esther: "My child, you are attempting a role for which few men and no women are fitted: to live without sympathy."

But Esther only smiled to herself, thinking of the day when she could tell him that she was quite as much of a human being as any of the multitude who sought comfort and counsel from his fatherly heart and varied experience.

"Why should I waste his precious time in discussing what I would like to do, when I know what I've got to do?" was her eminently practical-sounding reflection; though I am free to say that Esther's code as to duty and obligation, badly needed revision.

Then Esther had been all her life the confidante of less self-sufficing women. She was responsive in sympathy — which had a large artistic element in it — if not in confidence; and the result of her vicarious tears, blushes and shudders, was to intensify her personal reserve.

"Why, oh why, should a woman feel obliged to

carry a dead or an estranged lover in her pocket to justify her single state or her unhappy marriage in the eyes of people who are not losing sleep about either?" was a conundrum for Esther which she never had been able to solve.

CHAPTER VII.

BERTRAND COLEMAN'S SISTER.

"THAT'S a thoroughly sensible woman," said Bertrand Coleman to his sister, as they reverted next day at luncheon to the incidents of the previous evening.

Miss Coleman was cutting him a generous portion of his favorite strawberry shortcake. Her movements were prim, gentle and deliberate, like her voice.

"She seems to be," she said, looking up brightly, not as if possessed by a sinister doubt, but merely as if the case awaited her prepossessed investigation. It was this blending of amiability and caution in his sister's expressed opinions on people, which made Bertrand Coleman think so highly of her judgment.

"You ought to have her over to luncheon some day," he continued.

"I should love to — after she has returned my call," responded Miss Coleman, sweetly.

It was twelve years since Bertrand Coleman had laid in the grave the beautiful girl with whom he had had nearly two years of a happiness which seldom falls to the lot of mortals.

When the coffin closed on her and their baby boy, he prayed only that he might follow them speedily.

Though, as is the world's wont, many eligible matches were made for him while as yet his wife's fair body lay in flower-girt, taper-lit splendor beneath his roof, by the kind friends who had come to tender him their sympathy; and a maximum of two years was allowed him for decent mourning, ere taking another mate, he had surprised and puzzled his friends and annoyed the prophets by remaining thus far not only unwed, but apparently heart-whole and fancy-free.

It was felt (and rather resented to her) that his sister was largely responsible for this state of affairs.

In the first place, she ordered his house to the point of perfection. Then she made much of his friends. He was exceedingly hospitable, and as thoughtless as the majority of his sex; but whether he brought home one or seven, she was always in a state of preparedness as to the larder, and of imperturbable good humor, personally.

Creature comforts, convenience, accustomedness are more to a man as he draws near to the harvest moon of life, and if, as now and then happened, Bertrand Coleman began to feel a little interest in one or other of the pretty widows or maidens whom he met in such numbers, he found himself specu-

lating as to how her housekeeping would compare with Jane's.

Then Jane had no quarrel with any of his men friends; and he had known sundry old bachelors and widowers whose chums had been promptly interdicted the house in the sixth month of the reign of the new queen.

Furthermore, Jane was nice to his women friends. Indeed, she had a legion of women friends of her own. They rarely sat down to luncheon without some fair lady between them; nor went to the theatre nor on a few days' vacation trip without an equally pleasant companion, into whose home, also, they might adventure once or twice. Yet strangely enough, hardly had Bertrand Coleman begun to feel an interest in the aforesaid fair lady than she faded away, so to speak, before the coming of a fairer or a cleverer, till he was fain to think that his sister's women friends were like the Sultan's forty wives: each more beautiful than the other.

Sometimes, indeed, his sister rewarded his expressed preference for the society of some woman friend by such an abundance of it that he was fain to wish the latter never had been born.

His devotion to his wife's memory was very true and tender; though, as the years went by, she naturally became etherealized to him, like the sainted maiden Beatrice of the poet's dream of Heaven; only that the babe in her arms suggested rather a meek and lowly sister of the Madonna.

Jane shared his devotion to his wife's memory to a degree which touched him greatly, but puzzled him as well. For in Marcella's lifetime, as he remembered, they had not seemed to get on together. It was doubtless his sister's desire to make generous reparation, which kept her so observant of their anniversaries, and led her to make Marcella the standard for all possible aspirants to her vacant place.

He kept a fairly high ideal of women withal, only he marveled that out of all this bright array, that were so delightful as friends or acquaintances, there should be so few whom a prudent man would seek in marriage.

He felt he had grown very wise as to feminine foibles, family disadvantages, etc. Not that his sister was ever unkindly critical of friends or guests. Some things, to be sure, she noted, but rather in sorrow than in anger; and twice, at least, when certain mercenary families were endeavoring to entrap him, she had saved his happiness from shipwreck.

Do not think for a moment, dear reader, that Miss Coleman did not wish her brother to marry. The trouble was, as she often said, that she couldn't get him off her hands.

She did indeed wish him to have a wife who should be worthy of him and of his position. Miss Coleman must not be blamed if she felt it would not be easy to find such a woman. She would have been less than a true sister if she had felt differently.

Bertrand Coleman's wife should be a woman of irreproachable family, of perfect health, of suitable age, of grace and style rather than beauty — for was he not handsome enough for both? — of ripe culture, social experience and travel; of a beautiful disposition, a devout Catholic, a New England American, *and* last but not least, a perfect housekeeper.

To such a woman — there were a few such, she knew — she would cheerfully resign her brother. Meantime she would do her part to keep him for that "not impossible she," though the best years of her life were sacrificed to her sisterly devotion.

Indeed, she was not beyond marrying herself some day, when her duty to her brother should have been fulfilled.

She had some means of her own. She was trim, neat-featured and tidy. It is less than her due to say that she was marvelously intelligent and tactful. She managed her brother's house, and her brother; she could have managed an army. Major McAlpine would have surrendered at discretion to this very capable woman who looked on him with much favor — but for an awful fear that she would manage him.

Whether since he could not strengthen his will to avoid her charms, he eventually did not fall a victim to them, I may be obliged at a later point in this narrative to declare.

At its present stage, however, I can safely say

that a proposal from the Major would have materially altered Jane Coleman's view of her duty to her brother. As things were, however, it was still her manifest destiny to protect the latter from designing women; and she had need of Esther, of whom, moreover, she felt no fear.

The Colemans always closed their house the last week in June, nor reopened it till the last week in September.

Sometimes the head of the house took his summer holiday in Europe. Oftener, he divided the summer between some quiet New England beach and the mountains; seldom going two summers in succession to the same spot.

Wherever he went, Jane went with him. She was so unobtrusive and unexacting that she nowise interrupted his solitude; and so useful that he would have felt lost if she were not within call.

In this way she had seen, within the decade before our story opens, a good deal of this interesting and aggravating world; and she made it her business to observe and remember the things which her brother was morally certain to overlook or forget. Yet, as Jane was a relatively mature woman, with her mind made up on most subjects when she came to her brother, travel did not materially modify her views, especially on things social.

For example, she took the social lines of Mrs. Ray, Mrs. Willow, and even Mrs. Jones, rather

seriously; whereas her brother was wont to regard them with gentle cynicism; and Esther Ward was notable in her sight less for her artistic achievement than for our set's recognition of her.

Jane, however, was not especially fluent of speech; seldom expressed an opinion, except on demand, and even then, so balanced and qualified it, that you really were never quite sure what she thought on any matter.

On one subject, however, her conviction was profound and unchangeable. She believed, as the average woman always does about the man or men of her family, that her brother was far more easily imposed upon, far less able to protect his own interests, than any other man who walks the earth.

Wise, however, beyond the most of women, she never betrayed this conviction to the subject of it, but contented herself with — invisibly and inaudibly — closing up now this by-path and opening that; removing, anon, a possible stumbling-block or erecting a necessary barrier, much as a fond mother might in dealing with a child on whom reasoning would have been wasted.

Esther returned her over-due call on Miss Coleman the week before the house was closed for the summer. Mr. Coleman, recognizing the former's voice, strolled into the drawing-room. It was a comparatively leisure day for him, and he was not averse to linger.

Esther had been telling Miss Coleman that she could not get away till well on in July, but would have the whole month of August in the Adirondacks. She knew the region well — Lake Placid, Saranac, Lake Champlain, etc. The Rays and the Willows would be there through August and September; the Ormonds, too, but at another hotel.

No; she wouldn't be at the Chouteau House. That was quite beyond her. There was a nice little cottage not far from it, where she had lodged on previous vacations. She was enthusiastic on the sunrises and sunsets, the walk, the drives, the rowing, the history and the legends of the region.

"Jane, why shouldn't we go up for the month of August? We'll be tired of New London by that time," said Bertrand Coleman, with his ready kindling of interest.

"Of course, Bertrand, if you wish it," responded Jane, in her early strawberry voice, wherein sweetness was tempered by a wholesome acidity; "but, as we were there last year" —

"Yes, but we stayed only a fortnight."

Jane said no more; and it being her brother's way to do quickly whatever he did at all, she was not surprised to see him at his desk directly after Esther's departure, engaging rooms at the Chouteau for the month of August.

CHAPTER VIII.

ONE AUGUST IN THE MOUNTAINS.

WHAT a delightful August that was! Cool during the protracted hot wave, when the rest of the country was sweltering at one hundred degrees in the shade; with woodland walks for noontide, and easy ascents to high places, whence you could see Lake Champlain, a sheet of molten gold, under the westering sun, with opalescent mists about the remotest mountains — the place of their sojourn was a veritable Eden.

Jane was glad to see so many familiar faces at the Chouteau, and her brother was glad to see these diversified by interesting people from the South and West, and the English and Irish tourists who now begin to return our summer visiting in Europe with summer tours in our Northern States and Canada.

Esther was being constantly lured from her cottage by one or other of her friends from home; but as none so sedulously included her in all their plans as the Colemans, it fell out that day by day a larger portion of her time was spent in their society.

This fact naturally could not escape the notice

and comment of the ladies at the Chouteau; our set, through the recent arrival of the Joneses, Martins and Macduffs — Mrs. Mint stayed at the Hotel Champlain that summer — having now what might be called a quorum, and unlimited time for settling the destinies of the unsettled, which in their vocabulary meant the unwedded.

Mr. and Miss Coleman and Miss Ward, starting off for a long drive together, or together on the morning train or boat for an all-day excursion, or pacing for an hour at a time on the pebbly beach, were now a familiar sight. Almost equally common was it to see Mr. Coleman and Miss Ward *tete-a-tete* in some quiet corner of the hotel veranda or the latter's cottage porch, deeply engrossed in conversation; while Jane, in sight, but the width of the house distant, learned a new crochet stitch from some chance acquaintance, or talked home gossip with Mrs. Ray or Mrs. Willow.

What did it mean? What could two adults of opposite sexes possibly find to talk about for hours together, if it were true that there was nothing in it, as Miss Coleman asseverated?

If you had told any of the ladies of our set that these two faces brightened or clouded over such extraneous matters as the latest work on socialism, or the respective merits of Whittier and Lowell, or a comparison of impressions of bygone visits to the Vatican Museum or the art galleries of Florence

and Venice, they would have asked you indignantly: What did you take them for?

The fast-growing friendship between Esther and the Colemans was much resented by the Ray boys, particularly by Gregory. He spoke his mind in his mother's presence.

"Miss Esther has other fish to fry these days," said that lady.

Whereupon Gregory sought his favorite eagerly, and asked her if she liked fishing.

"It's all right, mother," he said later, "Esther is going fishing with me and Clement all day tomorrow. I don't think she cares so very much about those Colemans. It's them that's after her — confound 'em."

"Why, Gregory! you mustn't say such things. Run off now, and play with your brother. What is the boy driving at?" she said, half to herself and half to the ladies who were bearing her company on the veranda.

"If Gregory were a man, Miss Ward would have at least one lover," said Mrs. Willow, laughing.

Mrs. Ray stiffened a little.

"I hope my sons will all marry in their own condition of life. Of course Miss Ward is not like other women who earn their living, but still" —

The ladies' attention was diverted for a moment by Gregory, who, standing on one leg, and with eyes upturned to a third-story window at which he could

descry the chubby but mournful countenance of Stephen, Mrs. Willow's youngest hope, in durance vile for some boyish transgression, was chanting on high G this recitative:

> "Stevie, Stevie Stout!
> Stuck in the mud and couldn't get out,
> One leg in and one leg out,
> Ki-yi! Stevie Stout!"

With another ear-piercing "Ki-yi!" Gregory was off and out of sight like a flash; for he felt his mother's eyes on him, and wished to be able to say truly that he had not heard her call him in.

"I wish dear Miss Ward were really and truly one of us," sighed Mrs. Wise, presently. She was up for a fortnight as Mrs. Willow's guest. Mr. Wise was taking his annual vacation with his relatives in New Hampshire.

"It looks a little as if she might be, by-and-by," said Mrs. Willow, nodding towards the broad path along which Esther and Bertrand Coleman were sauntering.

"Nonsense!" snapped Mrs. Jones.

"Well, I don't know," rejoined Mrs. Willow, answering to Mrs. Jones' thought rather than her speech. "There wouldn't be anything out of the way about it. My brother says she could make herself at home in any position, even in a royal court."

"I think he likes her," conceded Mrs. Ray.

"The shoe is on the other foot!" retorted Mrs. Jones.

"Well, I do think she's the most interested," said Mrs. Ray confidentially. "You remember what I told you about that first evening at my house."

But by this time the people under discussion were coming up the steps, to be effusively greeted by three of the ladies.

Esther asked Mrs. Ray if she might go up to the children for a while; and Mr. Coleman went in to get his mail, and was seen no more until dinner.

"We are of no interest," said Mrs. Willow, smiling.

"He'll marry a real society woman," murmured Mrs. Ray, adding devoutly: "I only hope she won't be a Protestant."

"He's held out pretty long," said Mrs. Wise.

"Oh, well, he'll be landed in the end, when the woman comes along who knows how to do it."

"How do you know she hasn't come?" persisted Mrs. Willow.

"His sister says she believes he will marry, but that he hasn't yet seen his future bride," put in Mrs. Wise.

"Much his sister knows about it!" said Mrs. Jones. "He may be engaged, for all she knows to the contrary."

"Oh, no; he's not that kind of a man!" exclaimed Mrs. Wise; "but I wonder how his sister will like it, if he ever is!"

"What consequence!" exclaimed Mrs. Jones, who was known to be on very bad terms with her husband's family.

"I only hope Miss Ward isn't setting her heart on him," sighed Mrs. Ray; then with a sudden brightening up: "Let me tell you the queerest thing, but you must promise me, every one of you, that you'll never mention it. I wouldn't be given down for gossip for anything in the world, but you really ought to know this."

She paused so long that her auditors gave the required promise, lest they should miss the news.

"Well, you know how crowded we were in this house the night Mrs. Wise and the Hill girls and Fanny Brown came up. All the girls had to go over for the first night to the cottage; and even then there wouldn't have been room if Miss Ward hadn't taken Fanny Brown in. And what do you suppose? Fanny has found out what is in that locket. It happened this way: She woke very early. Miss Ward was sound asleep, and the chain seemed to be some way twisted round her neck, and Fanny thought it might hurt her. Well, I suppose Fanny oughtn't to have done it, and she'd kill me if she knew I told; but anyhow, she just reached over, loosened the chain, and opened the locket, and there was the loveliest pearl ring you ever saw, fastened in some way so that Fanny couldn't see if there was a date or initials inside. What do you suppose it means?"

"Can it be possible that she is engaged to another man?" queried Mrs. Willow, unable to break the chain of ideas she had already constructed about Esther.

Mrs. Ray thought not. "Who'd keep an engagement ring out of sight?"

"Who, indeed?" echoed Mrs. Jones.

"But he might have died," said Mrs. Ray, after further reflection.

"I don't believe the woman was ever engaged," said Mrs. Jones. "It's probably a family relic."

"Oh, but Fanny Brown said it was the most beautiful pearl ring she ever saw," said Mrs. Ray.

"Well, the Wards had everything heart could wish when Esther was a girl," said Mrs. Willow.

"Pearls are for tears!" exclaimed Mrs. Ray, sentimentally; and the ladies all went in to dress for dinner.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Willow was no longer a girl when she made what proved to be a singularly happy marriage.

"I've never had a regret," she always said, when states of life were under discussion. Her own happy experience was the justification for her well-meant, but frequently inept and futile efforts to tug her unmarried friends into the harbor of holy matrimony.

Mrs. Ray had married rather early, and from a prematurely developed sense of duty. She would have endorsed the definition of the small boy in the catechism class: "Matrimony is not so necessary but that one may be saved without it; yet when a favorable opportunity presents itself, it would be wrong to neglect so great a help to salvation."

Mrs. Ray's "favorable opportunity" was her first.

Like Mrs. Willow, she had no regrets, and though never passionately in love with her tall, gray, taciturn husband, she was very proud of him, and a little afraid of him as well.

She was as anxious as Mrs. Willow to smooth the way for other women into wedlock, but no happier in her attempts at matchmaking.

Mrs. Jones had married late in life, and not without difficulty. Consequently she had a profound contempt for unmarried women of a certain age, and said cutting things about them at every opportunity.

Taking the unwedded in bulk, she firmly believed that any man could marry any woman.

Mrs. Willow and Mrs. Ray said "almost any woman."

The "almost" represented their self-respect.

The three ladies had, however, a common form of expression: "Do you think he'd marry her?"

What "she" would do, was always taken for granted.

Once, in the history of our set, it became known for a certainty — no matter how — that a girl had refused an offer of marriage.

"Can it be possible?" exclaimed Mesdames Willow and Ray in one breath.

But Mrs. Jones, even with the strongest proof before her, refused her credence.

It was hard for unmarried women of any age to please Mrs. Jones in their bearing towards men.

If they were frank and cordial, they were forward, bold, or shameless in their pursuit of husbands. If they were modest and retiring, they were deceitful plotters and schemers, trying in underhand ways to lure the men on.

Mrs. Willow, being still very much in love with her husband, regarded all association of free men and maids with a kind sentimentality. She would have been perfectly happy to see all eligible humankind going up to church properly paired, "as Noah's animals went into the Ark," to quote a bright, but flippant girl's comment.

Mrs. Willow could not imagine any girl's entering a convent unless her lover had died or forsaken her.

Mrs. Ray took larger views of the religious vocation and more businesslike views of marriage; and inclined somewhat to Mrs. Jones' opinion as to the greater zeal of women in the pursuit of their settlement in life.

It is easy, therefore, to imagine how variously these matrons interpreted the openly cordial relation existing between Esther Ward and Bertrand Coleman.

Mrs. Willow would have heartily rejoiced that something serious should come of it; and did her best to help on this consummation by praising each to each, whenever she got a chance.

Mrs. Ray thought Mr. Coleman might be amusing himself. It would be a come-down for him if he should marry Esther, who, after all, earned her own living; but if he should, why, she would do the right thing, including a handsome present.

Mrs. Jones would have sincerely deplored the prospect of a marriage; would have put some stumbling-block in the way, if she could; and if, nevertheless, the marriage came off, would have pitied "that poor man," and declared that he had been hypnotized into it.

The problem of the pearl ring had been satisfactorily solved by the three ladies above named. It had belonged to Esther's older sister, who had died soon after her engagement — Mrs. Willow was pretty sure she had been engaged to a gentleman from Philadelphia; and Esther wore the ring in her locket rather than on her finger, said Mrs. Ray and Mrs. Jones, so that possible admirers would not think she was "mortgaged."

Mrs. Wise alone held a different opinion; and truly estimated the friendship between Bertrand Coleman and Esther. She liked Esther, as we have seen, but not enough to maintain an unpopular thesis for her sake.

Meantime the two people whose affairs were preoccupying so much of others' thought, were respectively preoccupied, but with plans, hopes and fears far other than those accredited to them.

Bertrand Coleman showed unmistakable signs of restlessness and anxiety as the month of August drew towards its end; and was vigilant for the mail and for the hotel register. Jane, who was getting restless, too, but had her feelings under better control, was always just a little in advance of her brother for both.

It was not for the coming of Major McAlpine that Mr. Coleman or even Jane looked so constantly and nervously. No doubt if he had come, however, Jane would have reflected less on her brother's perturbation, and shown less evident relief, when the search of the mail and the register was unrewarded up to and including the day of their departure from the Chouteau.

Jane noticed incidentally that Esther received many foreign letters.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PRODIGAL BROTHER.

As Esther re-entered her little apartment after a round of errands one chilly evening of the October following, her housekeeper met her with the announcement that her brother was awaiting her in the studio.

This was a sufficiently ordinary event, except as to the hour of his coming; but if you had lived under the roof with Esther you would soon have noticed how quickly she paled at the slightest deviation from the ordinary. An unusual postmark on a letter, a strange handwriting, or the appearance of her brother, as now, at an unusual time, invariably gave her the hunted, apprehensive look of one who lives in almost unbroken fear of unwelcome or even disastrous tidings.

This time there was no reassurance in her brother's grave and anxious face.

With only a distant and passing look at Joseph Ward you might have mistaken him for Bertrand Coleman — the same height and build, soldierly bearing, and rich, dark coloring. But near, and in full light, you would have noticed that Joseph Ward

was not nearly so handsome, though he had an intelligent, open countenance, nor at all comparable for a certain quiet and fastidious elegance of toilet.

It was the difference between a successful professional man and a man who has fallen into a routine in the higher mechanical pursuits.

"You have heard from Ned?" asked Esther, nervously.

Her brother nodded. He was a man of few words.

"He'll be here tomorrow," he said, after a long pause.

"And, as usual, without money or work," said Esther.

Joseph nodded again.

"And, as usual, I am to find both?"

"Well, what can I do, Esther? As things are at present, it's all I can do to hold on to my own place. And even if it were different, I daren't take him among our crowd."

"But he can stay with you, at your house," ventured Esther, "until I can do a little planning and thinking?"

"Of course, Esther, if it depended on me alone, I'd take him for a month gladly; but Mollie has simply put her foot down. She won't have him; and then" — hesitatingly — "you know she isn't quite well at present, and must not be excited."

"I suppose I must fix for him here, then," she said; "but I'll look for work for him elsewhere."

"Well, I can't blame you; but you are pretty nice here," he said, looking appreciatively at the rugs and draperies, and the solid, but not too abundant furniture.

"Haven't I worked hard for it?" asked the woman, with the faintest touch of resentment in her voice.

"I know you have, Esther," said her brother, "and you've been good and kind to all of us, besides. What would we have done last year, when the two little chaps were sick so long, if it hadn't been for you? I'm sure they think everything in the world of their Aunt Esther."

"I hope they're all right now," she said, with softening eyes.

"Oh, yes; you should see them box! I suppose it's hard that so much is thrown on you — but what can I do?"

"He's had six hundred dollars from me since June; and I'd try to spare him enough to keep him decently wherever he would choose to stay. Anything but to have him here at this time."

"Does he know?" asked Joseph, nodding in the direction of the veiled portrait.

"No!" cried Esther, "and for God's sake don't tell him. Why, he'd borrow money of him. Worse still, he'd write and say that I was sick and needed money. You know what he has done where mere friends were concerned, before I came here at all — when I was just getting on my feet."

"Esther, you have had hard lines, I know; but I think the worst is over," said her brother hopefully. "Just read his letter; I'm sure he has turned over a new leaf."

"He has turned over a whole book full of new leaves within the past ten years," said Esther. "But of course, Joe, I shall not let him want for anything, nor show any sign of doubt that he's in earnest this time.

"I know you won't, Esther; you never did. Poor mother used to say nothing could be more lovely and delicate than your treatment of him. Perhaps if you had been harder"—

"Joe, I can't fight my own."

"Then I think poor Ned isn't quite responsible. Of course that hasn't made the consequences any easier for you, Esther," he added.

"So he comes tomorrow," she mused.

"Yes. He was ashamed to write to you himself."

"Well," sighed Esther, "I'll do what I can; but somehow I have an awful presentiment of evil to come of this experiment."

"Oh, no, Esther; that's just because you are tired. Somehow you always make things come out right," he added, admiringly.

Esther sighed again. "Will you stay and dine with me, Joe?"

"Well, Mollie said she wouldn't mind if I did," he answered, with a boyish laugh. "I always enjoy a bit with you, and I can stay till the 9.30 train."

From all of which it may be seen that Mr. Joseph Ward was very much married.

Ned came not, however, on the morrow, nor for six weeks of morrows thereafter. Meanwhile Esther and Joe were in a state of mind which, beginning with a sort of indignant suspense, and running through various stages of fear of irretrievable calamity to this poor black sheep, who was, after all, of their own flock, ended in a conviction that they both had been to blame somehow or other, and that once more they would do anything in the world for him if only he would reappear.

This was exactly the state of affairs which Mr. Edwin Ward had intended to bring about, for he was quite aware that he had tried the long-suffering love and patience of his sister to the breaking point.

Meantime there were many anxious consultations in the late evening hours in Esther's studio between herself and Joe. Mollie "took no stock," as she expressed it, in either the despairs or the threats — still less in the penitent promises of her interesting brother-in-law, and put up her nerves between herself and his very name.

Meantime, also, Esther worked as seldom before, even in her always busy life; for of one thing, amid other uncertainties, she could have infallible certitude. Money, and still more money, would be needed.

It chanced, therefore, that she was not often seen among us during that anxious autumn.

Esther's irregular attendance at the meetings of the Daughters of St. Paula, and her less frequent and very brief appearances at Mrs. Willow's Sundays and Mrs. Ray's Wednesdays, attracted less attention than would have been given them at a less preoccupied time; for had we not also on our minds the engagement of Minnie Gray, and the elopement of Nannie Oldfield with an insignificant young fellow from Pittsburg, whom she met at Narragansett Pier only three months before, and to whom her father had forbidden the house?

But Esther's movements were not altogether unnoted.

The Colemans managed to see her oftener than any of us, as they studied her convenience better.

"That little woman is working too hard," said Bertrand Coleman to his sister, soon after they had returned from their protracted summering.

Jane agreed that she was looking rather hollow-eyed, and suggested that it would be a kindly attention to take her with them to the theatre, now and then.

Mr. Coleman, too, if her name happened to be spoken in his presence, kindled into a ready enthusiasm over her pictures, and declared she was a woman for our people to be proud of; but that we never half appreciated our own, anyhow.

He wanted one of her pictures, and would have had, of his own choice at a sale at Bellini & Leverett's,

"The Forsaken Christ," which appealed profoundly to him — man of the world as he was — but Jane agreed with Mrs. Mint — it gave her a chill, she said; and she would have "The Moss Rose Bud" or nothing. In matters of this kind, Jane always had her way with her brother.

When some one spoke of Esther's comparative seclusion, and immediately mentioned having seen her with the Colemans at the theatre the previous evening, Mrs. Ray, who rather lacked variety of expression, repeated:

"Miss Ward has other fish to fry. We don't count for much now-a-days."

Mrs. Willow, forgiving Esther's daily preoccupations, fervently and publicly hoped that Esther would soon be beyond the necessity of toiling like a slave.

Mrs. Macduff averred that this going to the theatre as a trio was a mere blind; for Mr. Coleman had "been seen" going to and coming from Miss Ward's alone in the evening quite often.

The younger Daughters of St. Paula, with whom Esther was quite a favorite, helped to spread the report that it looked as if there was "something in it"; and Mrs. Wise was so moved by all these things that despite Mrs. Ray's reminder of how far a man may go and mean nothing serious — she, always intent to be on the winning side in such matters — sent the surprised Esther a pretty gift the following Christmas.

But I am anticipating a little. Ned, in default of his father's, came home to his sister's house, and the fatted calf and fine and much-needed new raiment, a fortnight before Christmas.

Well-dressed and sober, as he was this morning, sitting opposite to Esther at her neat little breakfast-table, he was a young man of singularly refined and attractive presence.

Not swarthy, serious and slow of speech, like Joe, he would at first sight make ten favorable impressions to his brother's one. But experienced people would have been repelled by a something of feminine delicacy in the hands, too slim and white for a man; in the feminine fastidiousness of his toilet; and still more, by a certain indecisiveness and insincerity in the large, lustrous brown eyes.

Ned was never more engaging than in his penitence; and though it was the oldest of old stories, Esther found herself yielding to its spell once more.

"Esther," he was saying, "when I look about me, and think of all your past sacrifices, and all you have achieved in art and in social life, despite the drag upon you, I believe you the most wonderful woman in the world, and feel unworthy to breathe the same air with you."

Ned always felt good-natured when he was having his own way, and he had a ready stock of flattery which had stood him in good stead in many a hard place.

Esther waved away these brotherly praises, though not without a secret pleasure in them.

"Ned, you are younger than I, and in many ways cleverer than any of us; and you could build up a place for yourself if only you would keep to one thing, and" —

"Let wine and cards alone" — he was too fastidious to say whiskey and poker — "don't spare me, sister, I don't deserve it. But if I could be here, and have the comfort of your sympathy and advice" —

Esther winced; but it was what she had expected all along.

"I don't wonder you fear to have me," he said, humbly. "But if I were not alone in the world I'd be a better man. If only my darling Agnes had lived!"

Ned carried a departed lady-love in his vest-pocket against just such emergencies as this. Privately, Esther regarded the fair Agnes as a figment of her brother's lively imagination; but at least his moistened eyes were very real, and the discussion ended like all similar ones, by her promise of helping him to something right in the city.

Meantime Ned fairly basked in the brightness and beauty of Esther's studio, and the little home generally. It must be said, however, that the veiled portrait had not remained to excite Ned's curiosity, of which he possessed more than is accounted seemly in a man.

Through Jack Holmwood's good offices a place was found for him at the opening of the year in the publishing house of the Messrs. Frost & North. He made a good impression, took hold of his duties capably, and for fully two months Esther believed that at last the long-prayed-for reformation was surely achieved.

Then she was roughly awakened from her dream of peace.

CHAPTER X.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

NED left his sister one morning with no more than a dress-suit case could carry, on a two days' business trip "for the house," as he explained.

She had no misgiving, and was singing softly to herself as she mixed her paints the following morning, intent on getting for her work all the good of a clear, sunshiny March day.

Her housekeeper entered with the morning mail. On the letter which topped the pile she recognized Ned's too familiar hand.

"He was to be home tonight," she mused, leisurely slitting the envelope. "Something must have happened to detain him."

This was what she read:

EN ROUTE, B. & O. R.R.,
March 1, 19 —

DEAREST ESTHER: Forgive me yet again, and think not too severely of one whose presence shall never afflict you more. I accommodated myself with some of the money of the house — $650 — for I believed I saw a way to double it. Alas! I was mistaken. I was cheated out of that and more, too. I cannot replace it, and I cannot face the

manager or you. For your own sake, if not for mine, I know you will make the deficiency good and get the matter hushed up. *You* can do *anything*, Esther, and some of these days I will make your loss good, and win back the respect and love which I know I have at last wholly forfeited. Your unfortunate but always loving NED.

Esther dropped into a chair by the window, and tried to adjust her thoughts to this new calamity.

It was the culmination of many similar experiences. But here, where at last she seemed to be established in honor! How to face Jack Holmwood! How to meet the defrauded employers and set things straight!

The letter was so characteristic. The blindness to inevitable consequence which she knew so well — the willingness to blame some one else — "I was cheated"— which had marked him from his nursery days!

But hard circumstances had made of the dreamer a woman prompt in action as well as fertile in resources. "For your own sake, if not for mine!"

Ned had struck a master-chord here; for as I have told you, dear reader, Esther had a pride in her honorable place and name, though for the moment she felt little but cold contempt and disgust for him who had so cruelly involved both.

She looked at her bank-book, which by some mischance had been accessible to interested eyes — just $670 to her credit.

"He calculated pretty closely," she said, bitterly.

A shadow fell across the curtain. She looked up. Mr. Coleman waved his hand to her, and passed on to ring her bell.

"I came on Jane's behalf and my own to ask you over to luncheon," he said. "We expect — but, Miss Ward," stopping short, for Esther had not had time to recover her wonted color and composure: "are you not well?"

He looked down kindly at the white, drawn face.

"You are overworking. I have been saying so to Jane. Come over early and rest. You will enjoy Signor Battaglia — an artist, like yourself. I wouldn't hurry, but I have an appointment with Frost & North — I am their counsel, you know — before court."

Esther grew whiter — "Frost & North," she murmured. "My brother" —

Bertrand Coleman's professional discernment was keen.

Esther had done her best to keep Ned and the Colemans apart, but vainly; and the older man had read the younger correctly.

"Sit down, Miss Ward," he said, briskly but kindly, "and tell me in five minutes what trouble your brother has got you into. He has been with Frost & North?"

"Yes; and he has the money to make the deficit good," she answered. "It is in my possession. I

shall have it for you in ten minutes. Can you spare me that time before you go to Frost & North?"

He smiled faintly at the woman's pitiful little falsehood, and pretended not to see her slip her bank-book into the magazine in her hand.

"I'll wait for you," he said; "it is only twenty minutes past nine."

She was back in less than the time specified, and laid the money in his hands.

"Now, Miss Ward," he said firmly, "you will make it easier for me to save your brother's reputation if you will tell me the whole truth."

"Is there no other way?"

"It is the only way," he said gravely. "You are speaking to me in professional confidence."

She grew still whiter.

"Well, then, I have deceived you." And she laid Ned's letter in Bertrand Coleman's hands.

"Poor child," he murmured, pressing her cold fingers in his warm ones. "Meet me at my office at quarter past twelve."

Just before Esther started to keep the appointment, another and briefer letter came from Ned:

"DEAR E.: It is $1,000, not $650 — but some friend will lend you the difference."

She tore the note in shreds and put a match to the fragments on the hearthstone. She had barely time to reach Mr. Coleman's office, riding.

Well, she would have $125 for the picture now

in hand, and it was nearly finished; and there were other orders waiting.

Joe? But Joe couldn't get much ahead, with his moderate salary and delicate wife and fast-increasing family.

She had some jewelry and bric-a-brac on which she could realize.

By this time she was in the elevator, and in another instant knocking at the door of Mr. Coleman's private office.

"Give a well-ordered speech in my mouth, O Lord," she was praying like her namesake of old, "that my words may be pleasing" —

Mr. Coleman himself opened the door, and drew her into a chair beside his desk.

The beating of her heart sounded louder in her ears than her voice, as she murmured:

"It was a thousand dollars."

"Yes," he said soothingly, "I know all about it now. It is all settled. See!" and he handed her a receipt made out in due form to Esther Ward. "For your sake, you brave little woman, there will be no more about it."

"But I owe you $350," she said; "I think I can have it all for you within a week. But you can never know how grateful I am. The money returned will not pay the debt."

"Nonsense," he said smiling. "I am glad to have relieved your anxiety. Don't hesitate to count on my friendship whenever I can be of service to you."

"If it had been anything but this," she faltered.

"My dear child, we all have brothers and sisters and cousins and aunts," he answered; "and none of us know what trouble we may get ourselves into before we die. There now" — as he saw she could not control the trembling of her lips — "drop your veil down; I'll put you in a cab and send you home. You are not up to the luncheon today. But" — stopping for a moment, to make out a note with great ceremony — "sign this; and mind, if you offer me that money before the end of the year, I shall be very seriously offended with you."

He meant to order a replica of "The Forsaken Christ," after a while, and take it in payment.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FATEFUL PORTRAIT.

A MONTH later Jane, who of course knew nothing of the matters above narrated, except that Ned was a rover, expressed her sorrow that there was no good picture of her brother Bertrand extant.

"If you would paint him as you painted Mr. Willow," sighed the fond sister, "I'd be happy. Bertrand is a much finer subject, too."

"Why, I'd be delighted to paint his portrait for a gift to you for your birthday, if he could spare the time for the sittings," said Esther impulsively.

She flushed a little at the knowing gleam in Jane's eyes, as the latter laughingly but most promptly accepted her offer; but it was made, and could not be withdrawn.

"Yet I owe him that and more," she said to herself, to quiet the uncomfortable feeling that crept over her whenever she recalled Jane's expression.

"It's the only thing I can do. He will not misunderstand. I believe I am not fair to Jane, either. Why, she wouldn't be such a friend of mine if she thought — oh, if I could tell her the truth! She shall be the first to hear it when I am free to speak."

So Esther reasoned herself into an easier state of mind, and went out and spent the afternoon with Mrs. Ormond, by way of rest before her new undertaking.

For she wished it to be a worthy expression of her gratitude.

Now, dear reader, you know what none of our set knows even yet: why Esther Ward painted Bertrand Coleman's portrait.

Jane was over betimes, next morning, to urge Esther to a speedy beginning of the portrait.

"Bertrand will be delighted to sit for you," she said. "He can give you from three o'clock to five almost any afternoon, beginning tomorrow. The light is splendid at that time now."

"Yes, the light is all right," responded Esther, but there was unwonted irresolution in her voice and eyes.

Jane looked at her sharply.

"The truth is, Jane," continued the artist, "I spoke impulsively yesterday, and I have been troubled about it ever since. In all probability your brother may have a different choice. There is Signor Battaglia, for example."

"Oh, if that's all you are troubled about, be at ease. He says Battaglia is a botch at portraits beside you. Why, my brother would rather have you do it than anyone else in the world, and I'm sure I would."

Esther looked relieved.

"But, Jane, somehow or other I felt after I had spoken yesterday, as if I'd been a little forthputting, so to speak."

"Esther Ward, you are the most foolishly sensitive woman I ever knew. You said just what I was hoping you would say."

"You and your brother have been very kind to me," said Esther, with her face a little in shadow, as she restored a volume to its place on the book-shelves.

"Oh, nonsense; do you suppose we'd have asked you to places if we didn't enjoy having you?"

It was, perhaps, a blunt way of putting things, but it reassured Esther better than a smoother speech would have done.

So the picture was begun, and Bertrand Coleman was very faithful to the appointed sittings, Jane often bearing him company; and the gossip which otherwise would have died out received a fresh and mighty impulse.

There were two parties presently: that of Mrs. Willow, who, as Esther's "best friend," saw "something in it," and to which, of course, Mrs. Wise adhered, with many of the Daughters of St. Paula, among whom under solemn secrecy to each, Fanny Brown had divulged her discovery of the pearl ring; and that of Mrs. Ray, equally professing herself the "best friend" of the woman under discussion, who furtively exchanged regrets that Miss Ward should

aim so palpably too high, and made large advance payments of pity for her inevitable coming to grief.

Jane unintentionally played into the hands of this latter party.

"So Miss Ward is painting your brother's picture," said Mrs. Ray, when she had chance to speak with Miss Coleman at one of her Wednesdays.

"Yes, he's sitting now; I'm going to call for him on my way home," responded Jane, advancing to the door.

"It was nice of him to give her an order," continued Mrs. Ray.

"It isn't an order, it's a gift," explained Jane.

"O—h!" cried her hostess. She would have whistled, if she had not deemed that vocal exercise an unladylike vent for emotion.

"She offered to do it for a gift for my birthday," finished the departing guest, who meant no mischief to her friend by this too condensed statement of the case.

However, it mattered little at the time, as Mrs. Willow's following were in the majority.

Mrs. Jones had quieted down somewhat since her unhappy premature judgments on Mrs. Mint's affairs, and the tide of popular good-will had set toward Esther.

She, meanwhile, had had so much work on hand and so many grave preoccupations, family and personal, that she had gotten out of touch with the life

of our set; and, as not seldom happens, was the last to hear of the gossip which concerned her most.

. . . . . .

Eastertide, blossom-time, the season of joy and hope pre-eminent! Yet, once the first youth of any of us has passed, the long, bright days are not all unshadowed. The birds come back, but something passed away last autumn that returns not with the birds. The willows feather out pale green beside a thousand singing streams; and it is good to hear the sweet, shrill voices of the children, as they hunt for Mayflowers under the thin-leaved trees of New England woods, and to feel the fragrance of the pear and apple blossoms in our house-gardens; but the flowers bloom on beloved graves as well, and we go no more a-Maying with the untroubled heart of childhood.

Esther had always loved the springtime, and, for all of the hard lines of her life, had kept more of the child-heart to give it meet welcome than most women bring into their maturity.

She could not understand why this spring, earlier and lovelier than any she had known, should seem to have so long a shadow cast from before, on its blue skies and brilliant sunshine.

"Only six months more," she whispered; but the words had not their expected magic, although they stood out from the page in the clear, heavy hand — the dearest hand in the world! — which

had become so familiar to the carrier on the route that he often smiled broadly as he slipped the thick, almost daily letter that bore it into Miss Ward's letter-box.

"Only six months more," she read for the twentieth time that afternoon, "till I put on your dear little finger my ring, which I have given you to wear meantime over your heart. Only six months more till all the world may know what only you and I and our faithful Joseph know now. I would wrong you, dearest Esther, by saying, 'be patient.' It is I who have need of patience, my proud, shy sweetheart, who held my love off so long, and are so sparing of your love's confession, even yet."

There was much more in the closely written eight pages, but you of course have had your love-letters, dear reader, and your imagination of the rest will be fairly faithful to fact.

So much might happen in six months! She trembled now before the near fruition of her hopes, and mindful of a saying that had impressed her youth, "Misfortunes never come from the quarter they are looked for," forecast every possible seeming evil chance, by way of insuring immunity from it!

"God forgive me!" she cried, realizing the gloomy reverie into which she had unwittingly lapsed; "this is to be as superstitious as an oldtime Pagan or an up-to-date Bostonian!"

She began to make ready for Bertrand Coleman's sitting, noting, meanwhile, in her own despite, that

this long-lasting presentiment of sorrow synchronized with her beginning of his picture.

Not that she in any way connected him or his with her foreboding. She enjoyed his sittings, especially when he was in his communicative mood; and none the less when Jane was with him, to bring them both back from the abstract questions which they loved to discuss, to the pleasant events or the droll mischances of the world about them.

"A woman couldn't have a better or kinder friend," she mused, with a grateful glow at her heart, recalling his effective intervention in her brother's affair. She fell to wishing that he was of her nearest blood kindred; and realized that if she could have the confidant that — reticent as she was, she had at length begun to long for, Bertrand Coleman would be her choice.

CHAPTER XII.

A MAN IN HOPE AND A WOMAN IN LOVE.

HER subject came in on the thought, cheery and talkative, to her great satisfaction; for he was a man of many moods, and had given her his last sitting in a grave preoccupation, from which he roused himself with effort to make sundry inappropriate comments on the weather.

Today he came alone, and as he chatted with her, or often soliloquized aloud, the artist had at least no cause to complain of her subject's lack of animation.

"But it isn't quite what I want," she said, laying down her brush and gazing at him intently with a critical, dissatisfied expression.

"When you look at me like that, I feel as if I were one of Mrs. Jarley's wax figures," he protested, laughing.

"I want to send you down the ages with your most splendid expression," she rejoined. "Today your face shows only the surface of your soul; and personally, as well as professionally, I don't like you nearly so well in your bantering moods as in your serious ones. Now, don't do that" — as he knotted his brows, and looked as if he were cross-questioning

a difficult witness; "nor that" — as he struck an oratorical attitude.

"Mr. Coleman, we are wasting valuable light, to say nothing of time. Be serious, but not aggressive, nor defiant, nor preoccupied, nor self-conscious, nor sad" —

"Upon my word," — he interrupted.

"Hush. Sit at your ease in yonder big chair, and look as you once looked at the mountains — as if you wanted the best thing in the world, and had made up your mind to have it."

His face changed marvelously as she looked.

"Miss Ward!" he exclaimed impulsively, "I believe I can tell you — though it isn't as yet so much a question of will as of hope. It may never be more than that" — a slight shadow rippled over his mobile face — "but she is the dearest, the cleverest, little woman" —

"I congratulate you with all my heart, Mr. Coleman," said Esther, moving toward him with outstretched hand, and a reflection of his own mood in the gladness of her eyes and the faint flush on her round cheeks, "and I believe that your hope will be fulfilled."

He held her hand for half a minute in silence. "I knew you would be glad for me," he said simply.

Then there was a longer silence, not of constraint, but sympathy, as Esther painted with steady hand, and Bertrand Coleman mused on his heart's desire.

Esther at last laid down her brush, and standing off from the picture studied it critically for some moments.

"Come. Stand here and judge for yourself," she said to her subject.

He rose and stood beside her. Then, turning quickly to her, his face aglow with surprise and pleasure — "Miss Ward, you have done me more than justice."

"No, I have merely been lucky enough to get you in your best mood," she answered. "The picture needs many finishing touches yet; but I have achieved the heart of it today. I am well satisfied."

She spoke with cause. It was indeed the speaking likeness of the singularly handsome man beside her.

Taken in a less fortunate mood, the darkness of the coloring and the strength of the features would have made the face in repose a thought too stern or sad. As it was, the large, lustrous, deep-set gray eyes, full of reverent tenderness, softened the commanding brow, and the gentleness of the lips about to smile at some happy fancy modified the prominent, strong-willed chin.

He turned away presently, laughing at himself for his undisguised satisfaction.

"At least it is due to you, the artist, to say that you are making a splendid picture."

"And to you that you have given me a splendid subject."

Whereat both laughed like a pair of happy children; and though Esther showed no disposition to resume work, Bertrand Coleman showed none to depart.

He laughed again, though with a slight, almost boyish constraint, as if wanting to return to a more intimate topic, and half ashamed to do so.

"Isn't it your friend, Jack Holmwood, who says that a man in love is nothing but a gibbering idiot?"

Esther smiled.

"Poor Jack! his confessed experience of fair ladies has made him rather cynical. But if I had seen the slightest expression of fatuity on the part of my subject, I should at once have discontinued the sitting."

"Well, I am not prepared to say that I am in love — in hope would be a better word," he rejoined. "Nothing is settled — it may be that nothing ever will be settled between us two. There are difficulties, obstacles, on which I cannot touch at present" — he hesitated — Esther was listening intently, gravely, kindly.

"But you know how you want it settled?" she ventured, as he came to a full pause.

"Perhaps we want what would be eventual sorrow for us both," he rejoined. "She is only in her early twenties, many, many years younger than I. Of course," he added, brightening, "she is very mature for her years."

"And you are young for yours, Mr. Coleman."

"Oh, you think so?"

"You are a stalwart, hearty man, with your reputation made while you are able to get the good of it; with a strong probability of twenty years of pleasure in your work, in your home — in travel."

"Yes," he said, "I have never had so much as a headache in all my life, unless" — with a slight gleam of mischief in his eyes — "when it was my own fault."

"You look as strong as an oak-tree, as Boyle O'Reilly would say," responded Esther. Then, "Jane knows, of course."

"Well, broadly speaking," he answered, "Jane knows everything. But she is rather cold to my — friend."

Esther pulled out some pencil sketches from a portfolio near her.

"My rough drafts," she said, "of a picture I want to make of the story of the martyr, St. Dorothea. She sent her Pagan lover flowers from Paradise, to convince him of the immortality of the soul and the reality of the heaven for which she had given up earthly happiness. That is the climax of the legend, and will be the central idea of my picture, with an attempt to show the saint in glory. I will show her trial and her martyrdom in far perspective,— smaller scenes in the upper corners of the picture, after the manner of Roselli's Last Supper. You remember it in the Sistine Chapel?

"But pardon this digression — I am telling you about my picture, when I only set out to say that if St. Dorothea lived again, and condescended to your suit, your devoted sister would have felt that St. Agnes or St. Cecilia had been worthier of your aspiration. We women are all like that. No one can please us in our brothers' wives."

"You would have been different, Miss Ward. You are so sensible."

"Not a bit of it!" she exclaimed. "In Joe's case, to be sure, I hardly knew of his acquaintance with his future wife till they were engaged. I was in Europe when it all happened. So there was nothing to do but bring her a wedding gift from Paris, and make the best of it."

"You would have done that, anyhow. You would surely have done the kindly thing by your brother," he persisted earnestly.

Esther flushed faintly; but her subject was looking beyond her at his own fine counterfeit presentment.

"We first met her at the Mountains, nearly two summers ago," he continued, meditatively. "Circumstances brought us into very close association. Her mother, who was with her, met with a serious accident. I was able to be serviceable. Jane — she is a host in herself in such emergencies — was very kind. You know how acquaintanceship grows into friendship in a week or two under such con-

ditions. She seemed so young and helpless there among strangers. She clung so to Jane — yes, and depended so much on me, too.

"Well, we parted; of course making her promise to let us know how her mother's case progressed. That brought some correspondence. She wrote us both; but oftener to Jane, in the beginning. Now," he smiled happily, "things have changed, and it is quite the other way. One of my hopes in going to the Mountains last summer was that she and her mother would come again. They expected to, but something happened."

Esther was suddenly conscious of a strong light on past happenings, which at the time had puzzled her; notably Mr. Coleman's extreme restlessness and palpable anxiety during that last week at the Chouteau the previous summer; as well as certain remarks of Jane's on accidents which were "on purpose," the disadvantage of mothers-in-law, etc.

She gave no sign, however, to her companion, who, rallying from his momentary abstraction, continued:

"Jane would like me to marry a brilliant society woman. My little friend is too young, she thinks, too unsophisticated. She fears that her heart is less interested in me than her ambition, and believes that her mother is urging the girl into making what she considers an advantageous settlement. Just as if the poor child would not have many sacrifices to make in binding her life with a life like mine.

I think Jane is mistaken in her estimate of the mother."

He looked inquiringly at Esther, evidently wanting a word of reassurance.

"Jane is a very devoted sister, Mr. Coleman, and her advice ought not to be dismissed lightly."

"Jane is the best sister a man ever had," he answered warmly. "I would be an ungrateful wretch if I didn't consider her. I have seen my friend and her mother once in their own home since last fall. As I have intimated, there are difficulties. Till these are bridged, if they can be bridged, there can be no pledge between us. But I wish you had met my friend yourself. That was one reason why I was so anxious for her coming — because you were with us. I am sure you would have judged her as I do. She is so clever, so well-read, so womanly, as I have told you; beautiful, too, and so kindly and simple and devout. Then she is so sensible. Why, I can talk to her just as I talk to you!"

Esther did not lift her eyes, lest Mr. Coleman should see the slight gleam of amusement in them. She was thinking of Jack Holmwood's cynicism — "How good, how intellectual, how beautiful our best girl always is!"

"I know you will like her," continued the man who was not in love, but in hope. "I hope you and she will be friends by-and-by; that is, if this matter comes to anything."

"It will come to something, and I will surely be her friend, if she will have me for a friend," said Esther, demurely.

"Of course she will! Who wouldn't?" cried Bertrand Coleman warmly.

Esther was looking at him with a strange light in her eyes.

"Mr. Coleman," she said, timidly, "did you ever know Mr. Arthur Esmond?"

The question struck him at the moment as singularly irrelevant. "I can't remember any one of the name," he said absently.

Then recovering his interest, as he reverted to the subject nearest his heart: "I am going to Cleveland in June. My little friend lives there. But — upon my word it is quarter past six, and Major McAlpine coming to dine with us! I shall have something to do to make my peace with Jane."

"Perhaps Major McAlpine will help you," suggested Esther.

"That's so," said the stupid man in hope, "they do get on very well together; and I wonder at it, for Jane is a bit of a Puritan. Now, if it were Tom Wallace" —

"'The man without a redeeming weakness,' as Jack Holmwood says," laughed Esther. And they both laughed at the vision of Priscilla and Parson Steadfast, which the words called up.

Mr. Coleman turned back from the hallway.

"I have never spoken of this matter to anyone except my sister and yourself."

"It stays right here with me, Mr. Coleman," said Esther, gently.

"I am sure of that," he responded, taking her hand again into his strong, warm grasp. "Good-by till Friday, unless you should need me sooner."

As he walked across the park with his long, quick stride, he thought with a curious kindness — permitted, of course, to a man who was still only "in hope" — of his late confidante and her brave struggle, single-handed, against adverse fortune; of her sympathy with him, her loyalty to Jane, her success with his portrait. But he thought no more of her irrelevant question that evening, nor for many evenings thereafter.

Jane's pretty pale blue gown was just three shades lighter than her pretty bright blue eyes, and suited admirably her delicate complexion and her curly hair of childish softness and fineness.

But when her brother told her all this, in his blandest accents, her smile was fainter than usual.

"You are very late, Bertrand; Miss Ward should not have kept you so long."

"Please ma'am, I stayed," said the amiable brother, penitently. "Miss Ward gave me leave to come home an hour ago."

Jane said nothing; but there was polite incredulity in the slight elevation of her prettily arched eyebrows.

Major McAlpine was late, also. It was a way he had.

"You'll be late for your own wedding, Major," said Mr. Jones to him one day.

"Please God, I won't be there at all," responded the Major.

But he came at last to Mr. Coleman's, profuse of apologies, as was also his way; and made himself so agreeable to his host, and so charming to his hostess, by his evident enjoyment of her excellent dinner and his well-timed personal compliments, that her slight annoyance was for the time forgotten.

"Major McAlpine, I abhor flattery;" — she felt this much of a protest her duty.

"So do I, my dear Miss Coleman. I have too much respect for you to offer you anything but the truth. Gold bricks or counterfeit coin for you! You would detect them with your eyes shut."

Her brother followed the Major's lead, till between the two the prim little maiden's cheeks were of the exact shade of pink that went well with her gown.

Nevertheless, she went to sleep that night with a faint misgiving that Esther, for all her intellect, wasn't a bit more to be trusted with a marriageable man than several other dressy and frivolous widows and maidens whom it might be invidious to name.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CLOUD IN THE EAST.

MEANTIME Esther having dined in solitary state and written one of those long tri-weekly letters, retired to the privacy of her chamber, slipped into a white negligee, lit two gas-jets, sat down before the mirror, and releasing her hair from restraining combs and pins, shook it out in all its length and abundance.

Thick and soft, it was utterly innocent of curl or wave, and framed in its dense, dark abundance, her face tonight looked very pale.

She gazed at herself long, critically, dispassionately.

"And I am so sensible!" she said half-aloud. "I wonder if he ever tells the Signorina Ignota how sensible she is! I wonder if Arthur will tell me how sensible I am, when we meet again. He has not complimented me on that especial quality since he has known me. Perhaps I've improved. One changes a good deal for better or worse in three years. I've changed in one way certainly, and not for the better" — with a still severer scrutiny of her reflection in the mirror.

She forgot, I suppose, that the EXPRESSION of rigorous scrutiny does not improve even the softest and loveliest of faces.

Hers was a face that nature had meant to be round, rather than long; for consistency with her scarcely medium height, and small but compact and well-rounded figure.

But she was getting thin and worn now, and her face was losing its softness. The large hazel eyes had the feverish brightness of insomnia, and looked hollow, deep-shadowed and fateful. The mouth and chin though not large were always, when in repose, just a little too firm for a woman's face; but more and more of late had they taken on the repressed look of one who has sad secrets to keep.

A smile, with the flash of the small, even, white teeth, changed her face wonderfully; but Esther seldom smiled of late, when she was alone with her own thoughts.

"Esther Ward," she said again, looking steadfastly into those sad and somber eyes, "you should be pictured for some creature predestined to sorrowful fate, and in some sort, conscious of it.

> "'With steadfast eyes and unprotesting lips
> Drifting to an inevitable doom.'

"If I were a man, I couldn't love a woman with eyes like yours. I wouldn't want your shadow to cross my life.

"Will Arthur notice the change? When first he

spoke your name — 'Esther!' he said, 'it doesn't quite fit you. It should have been Ruth. You have the sweet and gentle and trustful look that goes with it. Ruth would have been all love, but Esther had room in her heart for justice, too.'

"What name would he find to fit you now?

"A woman is hard to love who has lost her little womanly fears, who never cries any more, who can live and work with all the safety-valves of her heart shut.

"Was I right to tell him so little about Ned? No word from him since March. Any day Arthur may see some horror about him in the papers. Mr. Coleman made so little of poor Ned's doings. 'We all have brothers,' he said. I think Mr. Coleman has learned mercy by his own blunders. Would Arthur have taken it that way? He cares so much about respectability. He never did a wrong thing in his life. If we had been engaged before he went away, I might have said more. But to write all those dreadful things! Up to this last affair I had some little hope of Ned. Poor, poor Ned! God knows in what shame or sorrow he is tonight!"

She opened her locket and looked longingly at the ring it enshrined.

"I wish he had bade me wear it, after all," she sighed.

It had never until today occurred to her to doubt the wisdom of her lover on this point. Half the

width of the world had been between them since their engagement. Both were of reticent nature. Both had passed their first youth, and realized how life's uncertainties are multiplied by distance and long separation.

Even had the thought come to her earlier, she would hardly have told it to Arthur Esmond. Women there are who, once serious things have been spoken, as to love and marriage, can urge their convenience, their pride or hope or fear on the man whom they love. Esther was not of these.

"After all," she mused, "the time is very short now. I shall be away for the most of it. Whom should my engagement concern, anyhow? It isn't like me to want to tell any one my personal affairs; yet, if Mr. Coleman had given me any encouragement, I would have told him. Is the giving of confidence infectious? After all, perhaps, it is better that I said nothing. I have told Arthur that Mr. Coleman has been a true friend to me and mine. When he returns I can tell him in what way. How surprised my friends here will be to know of my engagement! Mrs. Willow will be enchanted. Dear little woman! She has been so happy herself, it never occurs to her that there are any misfits in holy matrimony. She devoutly believes that all the marriages of Catholics are minutely planned out by the angels.

"And Jane Coleman — but it will be hard for

me to make it right with her for not telling her sooner.

"By that time, however, if all signs don't fail, she will have her brother's marriage on her hands.

"I hope the fair unknown is really as nice as he believes her to be. I should grieve to have him disappointed.

"But a girl in her early twenties! Arthur is a little younger than Mr. Coleman, and only seven years older than I.

"Perhaps I won't look so sad and worn-out after my vacation. Perhaps I shall sleep after I get away from here.

"There's nothing very bridelike about me now. And yet I shall be Arthur Esmond's wife with the New Year.

"A fig for your presentiments, Esther Ward! What if they have always come true? They won't this time. God will give you a little taste of happiness. No, He won't let the cup be dashed from your lips just as it touches them.

"What are you afraid of? Haven't you just been told that you are a sensible woman? Are not 'reasonable,' 'clear-headed,' 'well-balanced,' your descriptive terms among your men friends, anyhow?

"Have you not been told that all your passion and imagination have gone into the artist?

"And here you are worrying about your looks, indulging in nerves, and — yes — I really believe it, wanting to have a good cry.

"Well, you shan't have it, for then you would go to pieces, and you have too much work ahead for tomorrow for any such nonsense.

"There! say your prayers and go to bed."

But Esther's prayers were wofully distracted that night, and she kept a long vigil. Towards morning she went off into a light sleep. She dreamed she stood in a luxuriant forest, with flowers on every side, the genial sunshine sifting through the boughs, and a soft breeze fluttering them. Suddenly the sky darkened, a cold wind blew from the north, every leaf dropped to the earth, and every flower died, as if a blight had touched it.

. . . . . .

"Miss Ward, I hope you haven't got your death of cold," said Ellen the housekeeper, as she entered her room to open the shutters. "Here are both windows wide open. It has turned cold again, and it's raining heavily now; and Miss Ward, you forgot and left both your blessed candles burning last night in your study."

CHAPTER XIV.

BERTRAND COLEMAN'S MISGIVING.

BERTRAND COLEMAN had three more sittings before his portrait was completed; but Jack Holmwood came in the capacity of critic, and at Esther's request, for the first of these; and Jane brought Mrs. Ray and Mrs. Willow to the second, and accompanied her brother herself to the final one, so that the prospect of a resumption of the late confidential conversation between the artist and her subject before the former's departure, seemed slight.

Jane, however, excused herself soon after she saw Esther fairly at work, for an engagement with her dressmaker, who had outrageously delayed her on the new summer silk which she was getting for the reception with which the Daughters of St. Paula always closed their season's work.

Jane would rather have stayed, if for no other reason than that the afternoon was warm and the studio was delightfully cool; but she had always appeared in a new gown at the function abovenamed; and this year, of all years, she would not be justified in a departure from precedent.

She said she would come right back to the studio,

to be home with her brother to dinner; and she invited Esther to join them, in honor of the completion of the portrait.

But when the friends were alone they seemed in no haste to avail themselves of the opportunity which both had been desiring.

It was Esther's way to let her friends take the initiative, in conversation on their own affairs. That was what made her a favorite confidante of all sorts and conditions of men and women. She always apparently forgot what you had told her, until you gave her leave to remember it, by resuming the subject yourself.

And Bertrand Coleman had been diverted even from his dominant thought, by the sudden consciousness of a great change in Esther.

It was a change indefinable, too; not consisting altogether in the dwindling of her heretofore trim womanliness of figure to childlike smallness; nor in her loss of color; for both of these had been gradual.

It was rather the change in her manner, from the old-time ease and cheerful directness and alertness, to a curious timidity and depression, from which she rallied herself with manifest effort.

He often had said of Esther that she was devoid of self-consciousness beyond any woman of his acquaintance; that her manners had the ease and simplicity of the best breeding; that she had not a trace of artistic eccentricity or vanity.

What was it? Even as he looked at her, forgetting himself for a moment in the concentration of painful interest, her face, which was half turned from him as she touched the picture here and there, flushed uneasily under his eyes, and when presently he spoke she started as if she had been struck.

"I think you need a long rest," he said, kindly.

"I shall have it," she answered. "I sail for Europe on the thirtieth, to be gone till the last of September."

"Good!" he exclaimed cheerfully. "You have just got to that degree of nervous fatigue that you would probably break down a little unless you had a decided change."

"Oh, no, indeed! I am never ill; but I suppose I am pretty tired. I ought to tell you, Mr. Coleman," she continued, "that this is not a pleasure trip. Under present circumstances that could not be. I am going with Mrs. Mint, to render her some services."

"Why should you not take a pleasure trip?" he exclaimed. "I hope you are not letting that wretched little business matter weigh on your mind, or imagining that I ever think of it. By the way, have you had any news of your brother? You will understand, my dear Miss Ward, that it is not for lack of interest in your affairs that I haven't made this inquiry sooner."

"I have understood, Mr. Coleman, and appreciated

your delicate consideration," she answered. "I have had no news of Ned since that day — you remember."

She was facing him now, the right hand, still holding the brush, upraised slightly, and he noticed sadly what a very white, thin little hand it was.

"Mr. Coleman," she spoke diffidently and as with effort, "if you were me, would you feel honorably bound to tell — any one — about Ned?"

Now Mr. Coleman was never more in his element, even outside of his profession, than in giving advice. The role of guide and counsellor was second nature to him.

So, though he felt a slight surprise at the question, as coming from a woman so reserved as Esther, he answered without hesitation:

"My dear Miss Ward, there isn't the slightest reason why any one here should know of your brother's weaknesses, in addition to those who already know them: yourself and your brother Joseph, and I as a friend who was glad to be of service to you. I can't imagine how they should concern any one else."

"Not any one?" she persisted.

"Indeed, no, my dear friend; the fewer people who know anything of our family affairs, the better," he answered soothingly, seeing her manifest agitation; but he was puzzled, and rather unpleasantly.

He liked Esther too well, however, and he was too kindly and honorable a man to entertain a suspicion

of any friend without the strongest evidence. That Esther's anxiety should be founded in a love affair was hardly to be thought of. He had heretofore believed her wedded to her art.

He had said to Jane more than once that it was almost a pity it should be so, but Jane had said it was all right. Everybody couldn't get married; and how could an artist or any of these queer professional women manage a home and a husband, anyhow?

But what meant this strange nervousness under his friendly eyes? No, it was impossible. There must be some business complications.

"Remember, Miss Ward," he said, "that if there is any way, personal or professional, in which I can serve you, I am at your command. You need have no hesitancy in telling me even more than I already know about your brother. Nothing of that sort could impair my regard for you, nor for that matter, could make me feel very hard to him, poor fellow."

Her troubled face cleared a little.

"But others might not judge so kindly," she murmured; "and if anything more were to happen" —

"No friend worth having could be influenced in your regard by any misdeed or misfortune of your brother's, except to a greater admiration for your loyalty and devotion.

She lifted her hand in protest, but he went on earnestly.

"Believe me, dear Miss Ward, you are taking your own case as if it were unique, instead of fairly common. Women who themselves have not been tried and refined by sorrow, may make a nine-days' wonder of a man's discovered weakness or wickedness; but we men of the world, especially in my line of life, only wonder what has kept ourselves from falling in the same way. 'But for the grace of God, there goes Francis de Sales,' don't you remember?"

She smiled sadly.

"For one thing, I wanted to make it easy for him to start fresh," she continued. "A man gets discouraged when he knows that his faults have not been covered, and that his own are parading him as the returned Prodigal."

"You are perfectly right, Miss Ward," he said, heartily, "and I am glad you feel like that. Good women often pull down by their want of patience and reticence what they have built up by their prayers. For my part, I wouldn't be in the least surprised if your brother made a man of himself yet. He's young —"

"Hardly thirty-two," said Esther.

"There's a generous and rather reckless streak in him, too," said Bertrand Coleman, musingly. "He is just the sort of man who redeems a foolish life with a heroic death, and sets the virtuous plodders who scorned him, to blushing for their own

cowardice. Indeed, Miss Ward, you will never have cause to regret your prudence in this matter. For one thing that is hurt by silence, ten thousand are destroyed by speech. Perhaps I have learned forbearance by my own experience," he continued, gravely. "There was a time when my nearest and dearest, all but one, lost faith in me, and with cause. If that one, who is a saint in heaven today, had not hoped against hope, and run the most generous risk a woman can for the man she loves, I should be now in a dishonored grave."

Esther had never heard him mention his dead wife before. He spoke with unmistakable fervor and feeling. She realized, however, that he dimly apprehended her own difficulty.

It was not easy to suggest a possible similarity between the case of a woman on earth and a saint in heaven.

"But if a woman were handicapped by some family — disadvantage?"

"Bless my soul! A man marries the woman, not her family; but," laughing a little, "Jane holds a contrary opinion; you cannot but notice that mothers-in-law, for example, are very much on her mind these days."

Esther smiled faintly. She felt that her case was adjourned in this especial court, without a day.

"My — friend and her mother will be at Man-

chester-by-the-Sea for July, August and September. I cannot say that our prospect is more favorable, but at least I shall see her often this summer. Perhaps it is best for both, if things fall out contrary to my hope. At least I shall try to see it so," he said.

Then after a moment's hesitation he told Esther the obstacle; and she marvelled no longer that these two were still unpledged.

"There has been no talk of our affairs here, fortunately," he concluded. "Nothing is more painful nor often more mischievous than gossip about an unsettled matter of this kind."

"It must be awful — for the woman," said Esther, with a little shudder.

"What, all done now but the varnishing! Well, here is Jane, and we'll all go home to dinner together."

. . . . . .

They met no more till Esther stood on the deck of the "New Amsterdam," the centre of the gay little crowd who had come to wish her a happy voyage. Her stateroom was filled with flowers and dainties of various kinds. A sheaf of letters were handed her from friends who could not come to see her off; and she received as many more by the tug, just before they steamed out of the harbor. Mrs. Mint was proud of her.

Mrs. Jones encountered the returning procession,

with Bertrand Coleman and his sister in the lead. She "had not bowed down," as she phrased it.

"Why, you'd think it was the Governor's wife," said she bitterly to Mrs. Wise, who had also been intent on reconciliation with Mrs. Mint.

"Who can tell?" said that little lady. "We all want the favor of the future Mrs. So-and-so, anyhow!"

"It's just as well not to give it a name," responded Mrs. Jones, grimly.

CHAPTER XV.

DANGEROUS DELAYS.

It was a delightful voyage, under cloudless skies nearly all the way, and in cheerful company; and by the time it was half done, Esther was sufficiently tranquillized not to turn white when she encountered the little bugle-boy, as if he were a telegraph messenger pursuing her with tidings of disaster.

It was harder, however, to fight off the recurrence of nervous apprehension in the strenuous atmosphere of London, but she was a strong-willed woman; she had, moreover, a definite purpose in her trip, and her best thought and consideration were due, for the time being, to Mrs. Mint's interests.

That lady had given her faithful Martha a furlough, so to speak. Martha had a horror of the sea, and, moreover, a longing of many years to visit her only brother, resident in Chicago.

With Esther to help choose her pictures, and, as a much younger and more active woman, and a more experienced European traveler, to manage the details of the trip; and a maid for her personal service, Mrs. Mint felt that she could endure a few months' separation from her other self.

I have already told you that Mrs. Mint had a real respect and liking for Esther, as for a young woman who had made her way by her own honest effort. The reserve, which some of us disliked in the artist, was to the oldtime business woman just decency and common prudence. She had never patronized Esther personally, though she had greatly encouraged and served her by generous patronage of her work.

Esther, like Mrs. Ormond, always drew to the surface the best that was in Mrs. Mint; so that while the rich woman was undoubtedly overbearing and rough, rather than blunt, with many of the ladies of our set, to these two she was merely a plain, honest, kindly woman, abrupt at times, but never haughty nor uncivil; interesting, by reason of many out-of-the-way experiences, which she narrated with energy and shrewd humor; helpful and far-seeing, too, but not ostentatious of her powers of observation, nor her skill in character-reading.

The travelers spent six weeks in England, chiefly in London; and then went over to Paris, where Mrs. Mint's purchases, even outside of pictures, would have filled the hearts of nearly all the maids and matrons of our set with a despairing delight.

Esther bought her own modest trousseau during Mrs. Mint's occasional "laying-up for repairs," as she called those days when her flesh and breathlessness came against her, and she had to go under the hands of the *masseuse*. Our artist had wished chiefly to

evade Mrs. Mint's extravagant generosity; though unsuccessfully, if she had but known how that lady utilized the first day on which she had laughingly expressed a desire not to see her young friend from dawn till dark.

Now that her pleasant task was done she realized that Mrs. Mint was equal to but little exertion, and often dull and heavy-headed amid the liveliest scenes and on the most agreeably tempered summer days.

But Mrs. Mint made light of her indisposition, and protested when Esther would bear her company for long hours indoors.

They sat thus together one lovely afternoon in mid-September.

Mrs. Mint was undemonstrative as a rule, but today she reached out and drew Esther's thin little hand into both her own fat and heavily ringed ones.

"You shouldn't worry about me, Miss Ward. Indeed, 'twas I that was fretted about your looks before we came away. At least you haven't failed any on my hands," and she looked at her with a wistful kindliness that went to Esther's heart.

"Indeed, dear Mrs. Mint, I was not ill at all. I never was ill in my life. I've had rather a hard year, some little anxieties of my own, some cause for uneasiness, indeed; but, thank God, nothing that I feared has happened so far, and I think all will be well when we get home again."

"I hope soon to see you a happier woman than you are now, my dear," said the elder woman gently.

A mist came over Esther's eyes. For a moment she felt as if she could tell much of her past and the dearest of her prospects to this woman, with whom she had ordinarily so little in common, but who had proved so sincere and kindly a friend. But the moment of grace passed for poor Esther.

"Thank you, dear Mrs. Mint," she said softly. "I will have something to tell you soon after we get home."

"Kiss me," said her friend, rising a little on her couch; "and then, like a good girl, go over to the church and say your beads for me."

"So it's true!" exclaimed Mrs. Mint decisively, when she was alone. She had heard, of course, the common rumor, but was too delicate withal to put a word to Esther about it. Now she believed she had confirmation strong as proof of Holy Writ. What else in the world could have made the dear girl flush so deeply and look so misty about the eyes!

"I hope she will be happy. No one, nothing, is too good for her," she mused; "the only trouble is that a woman of her kind seldom finds a man who can appreciate her, and if she were unhappy in her marriage — good heavens, how unhappy she would be!"

She rang for her maid, and presently was examining with a pleased smile the sparkling contents of a rich case.

"I suppose he'll load her with jewelry, but he will never think of this."

It was a necklace of fire-opals, and they gleamed and glowed and shimmered flame-color and palest green and gold, as she lifted it up on her chubby hand.

The nearest church was the Madeleine, which Esther loved the least — except for the bronze sculptures on its great entrance doors — of any of the churches she knew in Paris.

But what mattered artistic preferences today, when her soul longed for an hour before the altar, whose lamp proclaimed the Sacred Presence?

The brief conversation just recorded had agitated her strangely. Only a month more! She would be home the first week in October, Arthur Esmond a fortnight later. His letters had followed her on her journeying; more numerous, more tender and devoted as their long separation drew to its end.

Only another month! None of her forebodings had been realized. Joe's letters, the latest received that morning, were cheerful. No news of Ned, to be sure; but in this case no news might be good news.

Oh, if it were God's will that poor Ned, contrite and shriven, were at rest in some quiet God's Acre,

with the pleading Cross above him! Then she chided herself for the thought, and remembered that Bertrand Coleman had said that Ned might make a man of himself yet.

Was there a shadow from the future, apart from Ned?

She loosened her locket before the altar, opened it, and kissed her ring.

"What is it," she murmured, "that always tells me I shall never see it on my finger? What do I fear? No misfortune nor crime of my poor brother could ever come between us. Mr. Coleman says truly that only silly women make a nine-days' wonder of these things. What, then, can part us but his death or mine?"

She prayed with all her soul against the strange foreboding which never gave her respite in her solitary waking hours, and transformed itself into dismal dreams when she slept.

In the vestibule she turned back and lit a candle to the Blessed Virgin at the marriage altar, smiling timidly as she did it.

"But we call thee the Mother of Fair Love and of Holy Hope," she whispered, and then hurried on her way to Mrs. Mint with a lightened heart.

The maid met her half-way in the corridor.

"Oh, Miss Ward — something awful has happened to Mrs. Mint! I think it's a stroke.

. . . . . .

Though Mrs. Mint's illness was not of so grave a character as had been proclaimed by the inexperienced woman who had almost stumbled over her mistress' prostrate and unconscious form, it was, however, serious enough to delay the travelers considerably on their homeward journey. They were to have sailed the 6th of October.

"She may be able to sail on the 25th," said the physicians when, after ten days the worst was over; and Esther wrote accordingly to Martha, and among her own friends, after her betrothed and her brother, to Jane Coleman and Mrs. Willow.

Except for the sake of the sufferer, who was more than eager for home, Esther was little troubled by this delay; for sailing on the date specified, she would still be in time to greet the arrival of her lover.

But as the days wore on, despite the best care that money could procure in Paris, it was evident that Mrs. Mint was still unfit for the journey. There was another postponement and yet another, nor were the travelers on their homebound steamer till mid-November.

By this time naturally, Esther herself was in a fever of impatience concealed with difficulty. Since the letters timed to reach them just before their expected sailing in October, there had been no home letters, as their return was looked for by every successive steamer.

All was well with Arthur Esmond, however, up to the last moment possible for news, for a cable was brought her on board the "New Amsterdam," announcing his arrival in the city of her home, which was henceforward to be the home of both, and wishing her a happy voyage.

While abroad she had had two letters from Bertrand Coleman, both full of the praises of his "friend," as he still called her; the second stating that although the way to the fruition of his hopes was not yet clear, it was clearing, and that if not at once on her return, at least soon after, he expected to ask her congratulations.

She would have had a third one of a more definite tenor had her own movements been less uncertain; for when a progress towards a desired end sets in, it often makes up for lost time by the rapidity of its movement. On the first of November the engagement of Annette Tremaine and Bertrand Coleman was announced.

Esther, however, re-read the letters she had after she had settled herself for the return voyage, and smiled over them.

"I wonder if he will be surprised when I present him to another recipient of congratulations. Jane will, at all events. Why, there was one day when I think she thought" — and Esther flushed a little yet, half with amusement and half with an inexplicable annoyance, as she recalled the circumstances

that led up to her painting of Bertrand Coleman's portrait.

And then the dim presentiment of evil, which she had shaken off effectually during the last few days before sailing, returned, still formless and vague, but more disquieting than ever.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TALK OF THE TOWN.

When Arthur Esmond knew that the return of his betrothed would be delayed several weeks beyond her first calculations, he remained in San Francisco to adjust matters finally as to certain interests which he had represented in Hawaii; nor arrived at his ultimate destination until the day before Esther's sailing.

His first thought after cabling her, as he was a most courteous gentleman, was of her brother Joseph, whom he knew, to be sure, only through the letters of his betrothed, but to whom he felt drawn as to her best beloved of kindred.

He would write at once to Joseph, and invite him to dine. But as he proceeded to carry out this hospitable thought, it dawned upon him that he knew neither Joseph's residence nor place of business, nor ever had known them.

He knew, indeed, that Joseph had to do with public works of some sort, and that he lived in one of the towns well outside the city's corporate limits. The City Directory gave him no light on his quest.

"Well, he will see my name among the hotel

arrivals tomorrow," he said, reluctantly postponing his manifestation of good-will; for to talk of Esther with the one who knew their relation was the one thing which would make bearable the week yet to pass before her return.

As he turned from the Directory he became conscious that some one was regarding him with a fixed and friendly scrutiny; also that the gazer was of a familiar aspect.

In ten years many of one's landmarks are obliterated, even in the most conservative of all our American cities, and a man's contemporaries are wont to gain in girth, or lose in hair; but with this man time had stood still.

It was — it could be nobody but Peter Jones, who having been an old young man at forty-five, remained an old young man at fifty-five; straight and spare as ever, though perhaps a little stiff, now, as well, but with a kindly gleam in his honest blue eyes, and real heartiness in his handclasp.

For the recognition was mutual by this time.

"But you have changed," said Mr. Jones, standing off a little and surveying Arthur Esmond.

"Yes; I have filled out somewhat, and then I have dropped the side-whiskers. My exile has made a fierce Yankee of me."

The men spoke for a few minutes of Hawaii and electrical engineering.

"Say, old man, come home to dinner with me. We are but two blocks from here."

Esmond demurred for a moment; but the prospect of a lonely evening — he could not spend it in a letter to Esther — was not comfortable. Mr. Jones, moreover, was urgent, and it was an excellent opportunity for picking up the threads of old associations again.

"Quite *en famille*, you know," said Mr. Jones reassuringly, as they passed out of the splendid corridors of the new Tremontaine, into the cool November twilight.

Mr. Jones had forgotten for the moment that Mr. and Mrs. Ray were to dine at his house that evening. Then Mrs. Willow and Mrs. Wise had dropped in for five-o'clock tea; and the ladies had so much to talk about, and the time sped by so fast, that they needed no urging to remain for dinner, especially as both their liege lords were out of town. Then there was Mrs. Jones' nephew; but he was only a college youth, and simply served on the present occasion to keep the balance of the sexes.

Mr. Esmond was distinctly disconcerted, not to say disappointed, thus to miss the *tete-a-tete* with his old acquaintance, on which he had counted. All the little company were strangers to him, and promised no increased interest on acquaintance.

But as a gentleman and a man of the world must, he made the best of what promised to be unrelieved

tedium, including his hostess' effort to exploit him, on the strength of his three years' sojourn in Hawaii, as a distinguished foreigner.

The company was small enough for conversation to be general; but the ladies evidently had a strong interest in common, and seemed to resent the irrelevance of the gentlemen's discussion of annexation, imperialism and the like; only Mrs. Wise having the presence of mind to smile, when a certain document of the National Executive was referred to as "a tallow candle without the wick."

Mrs. Jones seldom served wine, and neither Mr. Jones nor his nephew smoked, so the gentlemen lingered but briefly in the dining-room after the ladies had gone up to the drawing-room.

They found the ladies crowded together on one small sofa and an easy-chair, and still absorbed in conversation. They were all matrons, and even the stranger was not of sufficient interest at the time to distract them for more than a moment from their present momentous topic.

The gentlemen grouped about the center-table and resumed their chat.

"As you remarked, Ray," said the host, "if Cleveland had been President"—

But above the bassos and baritones the shrill sopranos of the ladies in the corner often prevailed, and the stranger inevitably caught such exclamations as this:

"Weren't you surprised?" . . . "But what will she say?" . . . "How do you suppose she will take it?" (This from three ladies at once.)

"How unfortunate that she was made so conspicuous!" (Mrs. Wise.)

"You mean that she made herself so conspicuous!" (Mrs. Jones.)

"No, no; I don't agree with you! She's a modest woman." (Mrs. Willow.)

"It was a case of love at first sight — on her part. Wasn't I there? Didn't I have the misfortune to introduce them? Even my husband and Mrs. Ormond can't say a word but 'I'm sorry!'" (This from Mrs. Ray.)

"Well, she's town's talk now, anyway." (Mrs. Jones again.)

The women's voices gained on the men's.

"They're talking of Coleman's engagement," said his host, to Arthur Esmond. "Bertrand Coleman — you must have known him. No? Well, he was just coming into prominence here when you went away. Let women get talking on weddings"—

Just then there was a stir on the sofa. Mrs. Willow and Mrs. Wise were taking their farewells.

Oh, no! they wouldn't allow it. Mr. Jones must not leave his guests. It was only a step to the car, and Mrs. Willow was to spend the night with Mrs. Wise.

So "good-night," and "good-night," and "thank

you for a perfectly lovely evening," from the departing ladies all the way to the door and down the steps.

Once safely around the corner Mrs. Willow said to Mrs. Wise:

"Well, I suppose that old cat will tear her limb from limb, now that I'm gone. I'd have stayed to stand up for her if any one was there to whom it would make any difference."

. . . . . .

Meantime the group of four in the drawing-room drew together.

"We were discussing Mr. Coleman's engagement," explained Mrs. Jones; "all the town's agog over it, Mr. Esmond. You see it's a case of two women and one man."

Mr. Esmond had been, meantime, trying to verify some association in his mind with the name of Coleman. Ah! yes. Esther had several times mentioned in her letters a Mr. Coleman, who had been very kind to her in business matters.

But his hostess went on:

"There's a scarcity of eligibles in our set, and women have been throwing themselves at this man's head for the past twelve years. He had good looks, money, position" —

"And was a pretty decent fellow as men go," put in Mr. Jones.

"Well, I trust he will be happy," said Arthur

Esmond, suppressing a yawn. Mr. Coleman's love affairs were of no interest to him.

"Oh, he'll be happy enough," said Mrs. Ray. "Mrs. Wise says that he's perfectly radiant ever since the announcement. I suppose you've heard that the wedding is set for Thanksgiving Day — that's to have it before Advent, you know. He starts for Cleveland Monday."

"Then he won't be here when" —

"No; I suppose Jane will break the news" —

"Don't you suppose she knows anything at all?"

"Some think she doesn't; but for my part," said the hostess, "I think Jane must have given her a hint, and that's why she's staying away till all is over."

"Don't you believe about the old lady's illness?"

"Not a word of it! She's a 'cute one; I always told you that. She's letting herself down easy."

"Miss Coleman says they'll have a grand reception on the evening of January the ninth."

"It will be great fun to see if mademoiselle goes," continued the amiable hostess; "but of course she will. I'd like to see her greet the bride, and I will, please heaven."

"Oh, the poor thing," said Mrs. Ray. "I pity her with all my heart; and I don't see that she did anything out of the way, except about the picture."

"Of course that was inexplicable," granted Mr. Ray.

The stranger's evident effort at polite interest in an abstract topic changed to a puzzled look.

The host was trying to get in a word edgeways.

"But as I have said often to you already, Hannah!" he exclaimed testily, "that picture might have been an order!"

"It was an offer. I guess his sister ought to know. Am I not right?" to Mrs. Ray.

The latter nodded; but said at once:

"You know Mrs. Willow takes her part. She won't hear a word against her. She explains it this way"—

"Mrs. Willow's heart was set on the match, and she's as innocent as a child, anyhow — I beg your pardon, Mr. Esmond; of course they're all nothing but names to you. The prize-winner in this matrimonial contest is Miss Tremaine of Cleveland,— we none of us know anything about her, except that she's only a little while out of school, and young enough to be her future husband's daughter. He'd better have married her mother, who, I hear, is a good-looking widow of forty-five. The discarded one"—

"Now, really, Mrs. Jones"— interposed Mrs. Ray —

"You know you yourself told me that you believed he was amusing himself with her," said Mrs. Jones with a dangerous smile. "I never professed to be her friend — I saw through her from the start.

Well, as I was telling you, Mr. Esmond, the discarded one is Miss Esther Ward, our noted artist. 'Notorious' would be a rather better word now."

"Hannah!" remonstrated her husband.

"Well, have you seen *Social Events* of this week?" she asked, with another of those dangerous smiles.

Social Events was a journal against which every one protested, but which nearly every one feared and bought.

"I must bid you good-night Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Ray," said Arthur Esmond, who had risen with a face as stern as flint at the mention of Esther's name.

His host accompanied him to the door.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Esmond."

"I fear not. I shall be leaving town immediately," answered the departing guest.

. . . . . .

"Confound your gossip!" said Mr. Jones angrily, when at last he was alone with his wife.

"What did that serious man care for all your picking at those people whom he never saw nor heard of? You spoiled his evening. And Hannah, what in the world has Esther Ward ever done to you, that you've been at her ever since you have known her? She seems to be a modest, inoffensive little creature, with a good word for every one. Supposing she has had a disappointment? Can't

you women have some mercy? Suppose it was your own case!"

Mrs. Jones tossed her head, and told him to mind his own affairs. He wasn't the keeper of her conscience.

CHAPTER XVII.

BLAMELESS KING ARTHUR.

ARTHUR ESMOND was reckoned by his friends among that tiny fraction of humanity who never make mistakes. He was punctilious in his morals, in his honor, in his manners; fastidious in his tastes. He demanded of other men and women that they should be even as he.

Yet he was no Pharisee nor hypocrite. He was simply a man in whom one passion had thus far ruled so masterfully that the rest had hardly had a chance to make themselves heard.

His intention, his profession, his practice, proclaimed him a good Catholic. If his foes (whom he accounted rather the foes of rectitude and honor) found that he had an infallible memory, so also did his friends. He was as generous as a prince; regarding parsimony less as a moral fault than as an evidence of vulgar lineage, and even a noticeable thrift as bad form.

His own blameless record, his unspotted family honor, were his idols, to which he was ready, though he knew it not, to sacrifice his own or others' happiness.

The woman who should bear this name, make a part of this record, must be above criticism. Indeed, except in the expression of petty envy in the matter of looks or toilettes, it was a principle of his that a woman could scarcely excite criticism unless in some way she invited it.

A great part of Esther Ward's charm for him, in the days while their acquaintance was progressing to intimacy, was her conformity to the type of old-fashioned gentlewoman that was his ideal for womanhood.

Ordinarily, the very phrase "professional woman" had set his teeth on edge. But here was a successful young artist, alone in a great city, who had made her way without losing in the least degree the delicate grace and freshness of the daughter of a sheltered and refined home; broadly cultured in mind, frank and cordial with her fellow artists, though conservative in personal and social matters; charitable and humble, as a good Christian woman should be; yet as fastidiously averse to "bachelor-maids," and Bohemian suppers, and women who boasted of their perils by flood and field in quest of "scoops" or subjects, or who clamored for new spheres of influence, or the reform of the universe, as Lady Clara Vere de Vere had been.

He had loved her for these things and for many others; he had loved her because she had been hard to win. Even after he was sure — as he had

fondly believed — of her whole heart's affection, how delicate and shy she was in the expression of it!

What awful transformation was this! Esther, the reserved, fine, fastidious; Esther, the loyal and loving; his Esther, dealing so deceitfully with him; forgetting her womanly dignity in the pursuit of another man's favor; the amusement of his idle hours; the subject of the sneering pity of empty-headed gossips; the talk of the town!

Social Events lay open on the table before him. He picked it up as gingerly as if it were a fetid rag, and again the horrible paragraph stood out before him as in scarlet letters.

No names were mentioned, to be sure, but the identification of all the persons was complete without them: "The distinguished jurist whose recent victory in the celebrated Gray *vs.* Belden case has added fresh laurels to his reputation and a princely sum to his fortune . . . the charming *ingenu* bride . . . the romantic circumstances of their meeting . . . the surprise, nevertheless, in social circles, as it was confidently asserted that the bride-to-be was none other than a certain gifted artist, whose fame has been steadily growing since the success of her child-portrait, 'Moss Rose Bud,' two years ago. A greater success, artistically, was the portrait of her supposed admirer, the last work from her hand before her very sudden departure for Europe last

June. . . . Dame Rumor is a lying jade, of course, but there is a piquant flavor of mystery in the whole case. . . . The prolonged absence of the lady in question," etc.

He flung the sheet from him into the open grate with a gesture of supreme disgust, and tried to readjust his thoughts to a new vision of life, with all that made it worth living gone out of it.

Was there no voice to plead for Esther? Indeed, she came before him during that long vigil in every aspect in which he had ever seen her. Indeed, the sound of her voice was in his ears all night. Those large, beautiful, gentle gray eyes looked at him so wistfully. Those soft tones stilled for a moment the jealous tumult in his heart. A wave of tenderness arose only to break on the rock of the sinister conviction which had arisen in his heart, and recoil upon itself baffled.

He went over the words of the little group he had so lately quitted. Who had attempted to soften the case for Esther? Jones had shown a manly desire to find a justification for her inexplicable action, but in vain.

At least none knew the worst feature of the whole wretched matter, in the fact that she was his betrothed.

Was there no word for Esther? They quoted Mrs. Ormond. She had been "so sorry," or "she wouldn't hear a word against her" — which was it? There had been such a chatter.

He had known Mrs. Ormond in her maiden days during his previous sojourn in this city. He remembered her as a woman prudent in speech, kind-hearted, good, through and through.

He had been a guest at her wedding; but in the stress and strain of this past eventful decade she had gone out of his mind except as the wife of her now famous husband, until Esther's occasional references to her within the past year, had brought old times back.

The Ormonds had been first among the people with whom he had intended to renew old acquaintance.

As in the case of Esther's brother, he had counted on them to help him beguile these last days of Esther's absence, by speaking and hearing her praises.

He smiled grimly, recalling the invitation he had planned to Joseph Ward. Then a new suspicion obtruded itself: Why had Esther never been more definite as to this nearest and dearest brother?

There was another brother, a wild fellow, she had admitted. "Wild?" how little or how much that might mean!

Never mind. There was now question of Esther, not of her family; and Mrs. Ormond had an opinion, evidently favorable, and Mrs. Ormond's opinion was worth knowing at first hand.

But Esther would be here to speak for herself in a week.

Could he wish to meet her, as he felt now, if he knew she were within twenty paces of him?

He would call on the Ormonds on the morrow, and the result would determine many things.

It could not explain away everything: for example, the paragraph in *Social Events.*

But — "an enemy hath done this." The words flashed through his mind like a message from Heaven. Had this man, Bertrand Coleman, who was evidently large in the public eye, some relentless and unscrupulous foe, bent on troubling his peace, and catching at some singular, yet perfectly explicable happening, with this intent? Painting his picture! An order or an offer? Something had been said about Mr. Coleman's sister. He would see Mrs. Ormond, anyway.

Twenty-four hours ago Arthur Esmond would have been appalled at the suggestion that he could stoop to such indiscretion for any end. But the speediest disintegrator of character in this wicked world is jealousy, and the sophistries with which its victim can justify the unworthiest courses are beyond belief.

He looked at his watch. It was three o'clock. A few hours' sleep, and he could put his project into effect.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Ormond had aged scarcely a year in the decade, for all of three little Ormonds, who were

audible, though not visible, while she was greeting her guest.

"We were so delighted with your interview in the *Wayfarer* this morning," she was saying. "Mr. Ormond was to call on you at the Tremontaine before his return, but now you are here, of course you will stay for luncheon. Such an excellent interview! Now that is legitimate journalism. We are all so interested in Hawaii, especially those of us who have read 'South Sea Idyls.'"

"You know the book and the author? Not the author? Ah, but you will: a great friend of Mr. Ormond's."

Mrs. Ormond paused for a moment to answer a tap at the door.

"Yes, we'll have the little ones in by-and-by. Three little boys," with motherly pride; "but I'm afraid they're a noisy little crowd; they're so strong and well."

The guest murmured his congratulations. He was anxious to get the conversation back to legitimate journalism. His hostess talked a little of the memories which they had in common; then as a woman's way is, jumped back to the interview.

"The *Wayfarer* always does these things so well. But take my advice, and don't give a word to anyone from *Social Events*."

Her guest lifted interrogating eyebrows. Alas for the straightforwardness of a jealous man!

"Well, they deal in personalities," she explained, "and would perform a surgical operation on your brain or heart in quest of news. We are all so annoyed — that is, we who are her friends — at a wretched thing in this current issue. Miss Ward isn't named, of course, but everybody knows who painted 'The Moss Rose Bud' — and then, to drag in the names of all the sacred subjects, as if the identification were not close enough without that."

"The lady in question is your friend?"

"I think of her as a friend, though we don't know each other very long. We were drifting into a pleasant friendship when she went abroad, a little unexpectedly, last June. She wasn't here in your time. Indeed, she is a comparatively newcomer. But you may know her at least by reputation."

Her guest bowed his assent.

"Of course," continued his hostess, "the movements of a woman whose work is public attract attention where those of us homebodies wouldn't be noticed. For my part, however, I am sure that whatever Miss Ward did was justified by the relation between herself and the gentleman in question. Something may have happened since last summer to break it off. I know nothing, except that there seemed to be a very strong friendship; the general opinion was, something more. I'm sorry, more sorry than I can say, at the turn affairs have taken, and the very undesirable publicity given

to this poor little woman. But let us talk of something nicer than yellow journalism — Ah, here are my little boys — John, Thomas and Edward — shake hands, dears, with Mr. Esmond."

That gentleman coerced himself into a show of interest in the three white-haired, brown-eyed and shy little Ormonds, but in ten minutes he rose to make his adieus, and expressed his regret that his necessity for taking the one o'clock train for Washington made it impossible that he should stay to meet Mr. Ormond.

With his last hope shattered by Esther's true friend and wellwisher, Arthur Esmond speeded on his way South, while Esther drew a day nearer to her sorrow.

CHAPTER XVIII.

JANE AND THE MAJOR.

JANE COLEMAN was in very low spirits; so blue, she said herself that indigo would have made a white streak on her.

There were conditions, as we have already intimated, under which she might have been reconciled to her brother's marriage, whoever the bride-elect might be; but these had not come to pass, and although she had prudently kept her mind to herself on the subject, the actual chosen one was very distasteful to her.

In the first place, Jane was impatient of anything which he who runs may not read. The various little difficulties in this course of true love had seemed to her mysterious in a wholly unnecessary degree.

Then there was a mother, and unmistakable evidence of clever management on her part, as well as of straitened circumstances. Why wasn't there also a whole brood of younger brothers and sisters to profit by Annette's good match, and help to waste Bertrand Coleman's hard-earned substance? What more natural? Mrs. Tremaine wasn't the woman to tell the whole story to any one.

Indeed, Jane wept at the picture which her sad fancy conjured up on this especial evening, of the second Mrs. Coleman recklessly using the best china every day, and the young Tremaines infesting the heretofore beautifully kept house, to the manifest detriment of carpets and bric-and-brac.

For the bride-elect was indeed very young and inexperienced; little more than a schoolgirl, and a puppet in the hands of her astute mamma.

Then Jane saw her own importance reduced to the vanishing point by the change. To do her justice, her sisterly solicitude for her brother was her uppermost thought; and her bitterest pang, the realization that she was no longer necessary to his happiness or comfort.

But she would not have been human had she not thought of her own altered position as well.

As mistress of her brother's beautiful home she had been the friend of his friends; as having his ear at all seasons, she had been courted and flattered by the host of people who seek the countenance of men in high places.

All this was over now. She was conscious of the change, indeed, from the hour that her brother's engagement became known.

Many of those who had erst sought her changed their manner at once to a sort of lofty patronage, and were vociferous in commendation of her brother's choice, without even waiting to see what manner of woman this was.

Whom could she count on of all to whom she had shown hospitality, whose cause she had pleaded with her brother, whose way she had smoothed by her ready sympathy and service?

Jane knew the world. Mrs. Willow was kind-hearted, and would probably keep up something of the old-time intercourse. And Mrs. Wise would follow Mrs. Willow's example. But both would weary her soul with the praises of the bride, who would have for Mrs. Willow, at least, the interest of a new playfellow.

On Mrs. Ray Jane could not reckon, and she knew that Mrs. Jones would promptly forget her very existence.

Really, there was only Esther Ward of whom she could be comfortably sure. Esther would never vex her by idle questions or inopportune comparisons. Esther was not moved by mere money or novelty.

Yet she was more vexed at Esther than at any one, perhaps, except the bride-elect.

Why had Esther gone off in that sudden and unforeseen way, just when she might have been of some service?

Jane would not have felt any better had Esther been in the place of Annette Tremaine. On the whole, by a curious feminine perversity, Jane felt that she would rather lose her brother to a perfect stranger than to the best and dearest of her friends.

But if Esther had remained, perhaps the evil day

might have been staved off a little longer, and at any rate Jane would have had a safe and kindly confidante.

Esther had no worldly sense after all. She did the most unaccountable things.

What would Major McAlpine think of Bertrand's engagement?

It was queer, but once things began to go wrong in a woman's life, they all went wrong together.

The Major had not called for a month, and Mrs. Jones had hinted very broadly that he had spent an evening at their house, and taken her niece to a concert.

"Horrid old gad-about and gossip!" thought Jane.

She was sitting in the back drawing-room, with the lights turned low. *Social Events* was crumpled in her hand.

Her brother called it a serpent, and despised it; but Jane had always a little feminine curiosity to know "who's catching it now," and always took possession of it when it came.

She thought, this evening, how dreadfully the paragraph which we have seen would annoy her brother. He was off for a farewell dinner at his club. Why should he have all the roses and she all the thorns? She was minded to leave it where he couldn't help seeing it, on his return.

She was too absorbed in her own sorrows to think of the mischief to Esther Ward.

But at the thought of her brother all personal bitterness was merged in genuine grief and loneliness. A sob rose in her throat and her eyes overflowed.

The bell rang; it was a familiar ring, and she had hardly time to dry her eyes when Major McAlpine, disregarding formalities, like the privileged friend he was, strode across the unlighted front drawing-room, and was beside her with hand outstretched.

"And your brother?" he asked after a moment. "I've been slow with my congratulations, but I suppose he hasn't had chance to miss them — he must be overwhelmed" —

Something checked the Major's rapid speech. Was it that he noticed a slight but unwonted pinkness about Jane's pretty blue eyes, as he stooped in greeting her? or did he draw his own conclusion from her demur when the maid came in to make another light?

There was an awkward silence. Jane had not quite recovered self-control, and the Major did not quite know how to begin his chat.

He was no diplomat, however.

"Hang it, Miss Jane!" he said at last, "I hope this change isn't going to be for the worse for you."

Alas for Jane's bravery! The tears that she had been trying to swallow, ran over, in plain sight of the sympathetic Major.

"Don't, don't, Miss Jane!" he cried, in real distress. "Confound it, what put this notion into your brother's head, anyhow?"

"I wouldn't care," sobbed Jane, "but it's hard to lose one's home, after all these years."

"What do you mean? Aren't you going to stay here? I understand the bride is quite a girl. Why, your brother can't do without you!"

"She's got a mother," sighed Jane, "and a whole lot of brothers and sisters, I know; there will be no place here for me; and there wouldn't be, anyhow, once he was married."

The simplicity and forlornity of her utterance went to the Major's heart.

"Well, he'll live to rue it. At his time of life, and after the home you made for him."

"Oh, don't say that!" cried Jane, still tearful, though cheered a little by this honest sympathy. "What good would it be to me that my brother should be unhappy?"

"Generous little soul!" said the Major, heartily. "But what are your plans?"

Another tearful silence.

The Major walked the length of the drawing-room, and coughed and blinked in sympathy.

"D—— it! didn't he have his good home and his freedom to boot?" he muttered.

He walked the length of both rooms twice again. By this time Jane had restrained her tears, and

even ceased jabbing at the tops of her cheeks with her handkerchief.

"Miss Jane," he said firmly, coming to a full stop before her, "you are out of a home, and I never had one. Suppose we set to work and see if we can't set one up together? You know my worst failing — I've been free enough here for you to guess it; but 'pon my word, if I had the care you've given your brother, I'd be a different man."

"I don't think you are very bad just as you are," said Jane softly, with a faint little smile, like a rainbow in the moolight.

"Jane, I'm too blunt for soft speeches, but there isn't a woman on earth I'd rather have at the head of my house than you."

"And I care more for you than for any man living except Bertrand."

"Oh, hang Bertrand! I beg your pardon — but you don't like him as well as you do me — now honest!"

His hand was on her shoulder and his face closer to hers than it had ever been before.

She turned so as to put her lips to his ear, and what she whispered must have been very reassuring, or the gallant Major would hardly have had the courage to be so demonstrative as he became forthwith.

It was midnight when Mr. Coleman returned home, with a little sinking at his heart, for his sister's evident distress had been grievous to him.

He noticed the light in the back drawing-room.

Major McAlpine advanced to meet him.

"I bring my congratulations and ask yours."

One glance at his sister's bright face explained everything to Bertrand Coleman.

After her brother's hearty kiss Jane's instinct of hospitality asserted itself, and presently they were all enjoying a dainty little collation together.

"I heard of you through Mrs. Jones last week," said Jane, as she was bidding her lover farewell in the hall.

"Yes; I went in there at his appointment to see Jones about a bit of land I have in the market, and she asked me to take her niece over to the hall where her brother and sister were awaiting her, as it was on my way."

"Then you didn't invite her niece to go to a concert with you?"

"I'd look well! Did she tell you I did? The old mischief-maker! I suppose you know she's fairly eating the flesh off Miss Ward's bones."

"Sh!" said Jane, glancing up the stairs. "Now that everything has come out so happily, I don't want Bertrand worried before he goes away. Don't, for your life, tell him about *Social Events*."

. . . . . .

"Well, I've done it!" cried the Major, as he lit the gas in his dusty bachelor apartments. "I've done it, and I'm not sorry. She'll make you walk a

crack, old boy; but if you don't walk a crack for her, you'll walk a plank for Old Nick. Best little woman in town, bless her heart!"

And the Major said his brief but too-often-forgotten prayers, took a smaller "night-cap" than usual, and was soon in the land of dreams.

At the same hour Bertrand Coleman turned to his rest with a lightened heart; and Jane, having made a big promise to St. Joseph, to be fulfilled on her wedding day, burned *Social Events* before she went to bed.

And the high wind in the rear of the "New Amsterdam," which was gathering for the worst storm of many decades, hastened that good ship into harbor a whole day ahead of her time.

CHAPTER XIX.

UNWELCOMED HOME.

A HUNDRED times during the last days of the voyage, Esther had forecast her arrival and her meeting with the lover from whom she had been so long separated.

Pacing the deck as the wintry day was slowly breaking over the bleak gray sea, she tried to picture him coming towards her with that restrained eagerness which she knew so well, and the weight lifted from her heart for a while, and her spirits rose in a timid, tender delight that was like the fluttering of a gentle bird in a familiar hand, whose warmth it loves, yet fears a little.

Pacing the deck at night, while the stars, shining through the masts and rigging, outlined the semblance of an altar illumined for the Sacrifice, she dreamed again of that first moment of reunion, but hope failed and fainted.

"The joy of love's fruition is not for you," warned the waves, as they ran high that last night of all, under the speeding gale.

The "New Amsterdam" had been scheduled to arrive Sunday morning. It was ten o'clock Saturday morning when she came in at Chestertown wharf.

There had been but a handful of cabin passengers, and they for the most part had taken their friends unaware.

Was there not one at least, of all for whom the incoming of the "New Amsterdam" had a meaning, who would have known when she was sighted, who would have been at the telephone since daybreak, and at Chestertown wharf for the last hour?

Esther drew her breath hard, and felt a mist between her and the familiar scene as the vessel swung into her berth; but when it cleared there was no one in sight but Martha Cutts. While Esther was straining her eyes as if to compel another image on their retina, Martha had boarded the steamer, and there was nothing for Esther but to take her to the sheltered spot on deck where Mrs. Mint and her maid were sitting in the midst of trunks and bags and steamer chairs and strapped rugs and umbrellas.

In the joy of greeting her faithful Martha, Mrs. Mint forgot Esther for the moment.

Directly she noticed her pallid face and startled eyes, however, she had but one explanation for them; but she dared not express what she felt, except in an increased kindliness of manner.

"Oh, Miss Ward!" cried Mrs. Cutts, "I was almost forgetting, but your Ellen was out at our house at daybreak to see if we had a later word of you, and she is all ready for you!"

"No matter," said Mrs. Mint heartily; "Miss Ward is coming right home with us."

"Thank you, Mrs. Mint," said Esther faintly, "but if you will be good enough to drive me home after we have passed the customs, it will be better for me. My brother will, of course, expect to find me there."

Mrs. Mint forbore to press her invitation. She understood, or thought she understood, Esther's motive. But her own heart sank as she saw all the light go out of her friend's eyes when the expected one came not, for all her anxious glances; and it was a forlorn and travel-weary woman who entered the apartments made fresh and fair for her home-coming, but empty of kindred or lover's greeting.

Mrs. Mint's forebodings were confirmed as she and Martha rode the rest of the way together, and the latter unfolded to her the gossip in which poor Esther's name had become so painfully prominent.

Esther found a huge accumulation of letters and newspapers, mostly unimportant, but not a line to explain Arthur Esmond's absence at this supreme moment.

That there was no word from her intimate friends in the city was easily explained. Jane Coleman and Mrs. Willow had undoubtedly planned to meet her. Her brother had not been able to learn over night, of the unexpected early arrival of the "New Amsterdam," but probably was aware of it by this time, and would be with her within an hour.

This was indeed the case. She had hardly finished

the letter awaiting her from Bertrand Coleman, in which he detailed to her the happy solution of all his difficulties, and his approaching marriage — the letter was a week old, and she was too preoccupied with her own anxieties to give it the complete and friendly attention it would otherwise have had from her — when her brother entered.

Her effort at a cheerful greeting was a sad failure. Joe held her off in his strong arms for a moment. He dimly divined her trouble, but he had her own reserved nature.

"Why, Esther!" was all he could say, as he smoothed the thick, soft hair off her temples.

If Esther had cried, as Mollie always did, when things went wrong, Joe would have found some comforting word. But what could anyone say before this pale, hollow-eyed, tearless grief?

She slipped from his hands down on the little sofa in the corner of the studio, and he sat silently beside her.

At last she spoke, in a frightened whisper: "What has happened? Don't fear to tell me. I can bear anything better than this awful suspense."

"Esther, I don't know how to explain it. He was here at the Tremontaine a week ago Wednesday" —

"Yes," she interrupted, "I had a cablegram from him on the steamer at Liverpool Thursday morning."

"I called Thursday," continued Joe, "only to find

that he had left for Washington very unexpectedly. I learned that he would be at the Normandie, and wrote him from home that evening, expressing my great regret at not seeing him, and asking him to write me when he expected to return. I have heard nothing since."

Esther thought of Arthur Esmond's minute and punctilious courtesy, and her heart died within her. His going to Washington was easily explained. He should have gone there at some time within the month, in any event, and she could understand that he might have had a sudden summons thither. But that he should not have returned to meet her; that neither letter nor telegram should await her; that Joe's letter should remain unanswered — what explanation for these inconceivable things!

"And Ned?" she asked.

"Not a word from him or of him," answered Joe.

There was another long, sorrowful silence.

"Why don't you telegraph Mr. Esmond at the Normandie?" suggested Joe, diffidently.

Esther caught at the idea. Why not? Was she not Arthur Esmond's promised wife? She was well within her right, for surely nothing but some dread calamity which left him powerless, had kept him from her now.

Joe gladly noted her returning color, and continued:

"Write your telegram now, and I'll send it at

once, and you can follow it with a letter this afternoon."

Esther complied, and when Joe returned for luncheon with her, she had recovered something of her wonted self-control.

But she made only a show of eating to keep her brother in countenance, and her efforts at conversation on the incidents of her trip were so pitiful that her silence would have been easier to her kind-hearted companion.

He felt, however, that his presence was a comfort to her, and he made himself at home in her studio with a novel, while she retired to write her letter.

As the dusk came on, the big, fast-falling snowflakes and the high wind warned him to hasten to his home, half an hour distant by the railroad.

"You know our little baby girl is quite delicate," explained Joe.

Esther's heart smote her, for all of her own trouble. She had quite forgotten the new baby.

"I'm sure she's a dear little thing, Joe. Whom does she look like, and what is her name?"

Joe looked embarrassed.

"Well, I think she looks like you, Esther; but seeing she was our first little girl, I left the choice of name to her mother. She is Gladys Cecilia."

Esther divined the cause of her brother's embarrassment, but smiled at the baby's name in spite of herself.

"I'm glad there's not another Esther Ward," she said; but Joe felt a lump in his throat as she said it.

The storm came on that night, and for two days it had its will on land and sea.

Esther was in an isolation as complete as if she were stranded on a desert island.

On the third day came in the news of ships gone down at sea or wrecked on shore; of wayfarers lost in snowdrifts; and of the minor evils of travel and traffic interrupted.

Some local letters reached Esther. Mrs. Willow, Mrs. Wise and Jane Coleman sent notes of congratulation on her safe arrival, and promises of calls on the first possible day.

Mrs. Mint sent Martha in to see for herself how Esther had fared during the storm, and to entreat her to return with her for a few days to "the Castle." But no letter came from Arthur Esmond, and Martha returned to Mrs. Mint alone.

CHAPTER XX.

A WOMAN FORSAKEN.

ARTHUR ESMOND was still in Washington; for the morning papers reproduced a portion of another interview on Hawaiian affairs, appearing in the Washington *Post* the day previous.

Esther felt, when she glanced at it, as if an impassable wall had suddenly risen on her path of life. She could not go forward; she could not turn back. A succession of sleepless nights had left her with nerves unstrung, and the non-arrival of the letter for which she had hoped against hope seemed the last straw.

She sat down at her desk, faint and shuddering. What could it mean? The only imaginable explanation was, that in some way or another her lover had learned something of poor Ned's unpleasant history, and was displeased with her for having kept it from him.

Yet this was so far-fetched, so utterly unlikely. Was she not dishonoring her lover by entertaining the thought for a moment?

If, indeed, Ned's whole career were laid bare before him, and he remembered Esther's reticence about it,

would he not, as a man with his own family ties, rather have honored a sister's desire to hide her brother's weakness? Would he not, as a man of the world, have thought of the commonness of such black sheep? Would he not, as a lover, have had his love tenfolded by pity, and desire to stand between the woman of his choice and the sorrow and shame which might come of her kinship?

Bertrand Coleman would have done it. He had said, in effect, that any man would do it. But then he was a man who had proved human weakness by his own experience, as Arthur never had.

At once she bethought herself that, absorbed in her own perplexity and distress, she had been unmindful of this good friend in his happiness.

In her hope of a happy outcome of his affair, she had brought home a little gift for the bride. This she would send over to the house to await their return; but a note of congratulation must go to them at once at Asheville, where they were spending their honeymoon.

These duties of friendship accomplished, Esther returned to her sorrowful musing.

Again the barely imaginable explanation presented itself in an altered form. Her lover knew all about Ned, and was not holding this fairly common misfortune against her, but only her want of confidence in him.

He was a blameless man, but proud, perhaps; yes,

and rather exacting — she would not for worlds have said "jealous."

Well, perhaps she had been wrong. And if in the least she had grieved the heart that was hers, surely she owed reparation. Ah, me! the ingenuity of a woman's love in devising excuses for the beloved.

She spread a sheet of paper before her and wrote the date. Then she dropped her pen, while the blood surged over her pale face.

Was she forcing herself on a man who wished to have done with her?

But instantly a myriad passionate words of his love and longing, a myriad proofs of his devotion, clamored against this new temptation.

"It is I who have been proud and hard," murmured the woman; and she wrote:

"Oh, Arthur! what has happened? If I have been reticent on family matters, it was only that one near and dear to me, for all his folly, might meet you unembarrassed, and keep his self-respect for a fresh start in life. Believe me, my dearest, there is explanation for my silence, if you will but come and hear it. ESTHER."

I think if the madness of wrath against one beloved had not been working in Arthur Esmond's brain, this poor little letter had brought him to Esther as fast as the lightning express could carry him.

But at breakfast that morning he had sat next table to Madame Vargous, who always went to Washington for the winter, and as she was rather deaf and her companion had to speak above the ordinary conversational tone for her comfort, he could not avoid hearing them. Their talk was all about Bertrand Coleman's wedding and "poor Miss Ward."

"Indeed, my dear," Madame Vargous said, as they were about to rise from the table, "her best friends say that she'll never recover from the blow. I'm so sorry, for she was a dear little woman, and always so sweet to me. But the moral of it is that a woman should never let go of her heart in advance of her absolute certainty of a man's intentions. We women who know the world, realize how far a man may go without meaning anything. But evidently poor Miss Ward" —

Arthur Esmond could endure no more.

As he reached his room and unfolded and read again the note he had been crumpling in his hand, his face grew dark and hard.

Seizing his pen he wrote half a dozen lines, read them carefully from force of business habit, addressed, sealed and stamped the envelope deliberately, and mailed the letter himself, too wroth to know or care that he might better have dropped live coals into the tender hands that soon would open to receive it.

This was what Esther read the following morning:

"Esther Ward, how can you ask the cause of my absence and silence? Who knows it as you know it? Why do you try to mislead me, with the weak evasion of your last letter? How can you offer to explain what is beyond all justification?"

So her presentiment was realized; the worst of her dreams was but a faint foreshowing of sadder reality; the message of the sad sea-waves was not an idle fear. The happiness of love fulfilled was not for her. The ring of her betrothal would never shine upon her hand.

She was accused of she knew not what, and condemned without a hearing by the man to whom she had given the love of her heart.

The calmness of despair settled over her. There was no more to be said. She opened her locket and withdrew the ring, packed it up in a tiny box, addressed it to Arthur Esmond, and sent it, duly registered, from the near-by station.

Then coming back to her studio she confronted the dreary future.

"My God! my God! how can I go on? How can I ever face the world again?"

She murmured the words with dry lips as her tearless eyes turned to her "Forsaken Christ."

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE HANDS OF HER FRIENDS.

THAT afternoon her welcome-home calls began. They were not numerous after this first day, but she was too sad to notice or to care. Mrs. Willow and Mrs. Wise came first.

"I wouldn't dare to go alone. I feel too bad for her!" exclaimed Mrs. Willow, entreating her friend's company.

Esther rallied her forces and tried to meet the ladies blithely; but her cheerfulness was overdone, and she could not conceal the change which this direful week had made in her appearance. Frail as she had looked at her departure, she was frailer now, and there was a look in her eyes which no one had seen in them before.

The manner of her visitors disturbed her, too. It was as if they had come on a call of condolence instead of congratulation, she said to herself, after they had taken their leave.

But she chided herself. "It is my heartsick fancy. They know nothing. How could they? Thank God at least that I was able to keep my own counsel. I shall be spared the eyes of the

curious, and the sympathy that would be harder to bear than insult."

Meantime Mrs. Willow was saying to Mrs. Wise: "Oh, my dear, doesn't she look like death? And did you notice how nervous and distrait she was? Oh, *I* am afraid it's true! I wouldn't have believed it, if I hadn't seen the change in her."

"And did you notice," put in Mrs. Wise eagerly, "that she never named the Colemans? I was just dying to say something about them — not to be unkind, you know, but just because of the doubt on my mind — but I didn't dare to."

"Oh, I couldn't have stood it a minute if you had. There's no use in running a penknife in a person, to see if there's blood in their body. I know all I want to know now. That poor girl won't live a month."

"Well, Mrs. Ray won't be so bashful," rejoined Mrs. Wise. "She's too polite to ask leading questions, of course, but you know her way of bringing up a delicate subject and harping on it, till she sees how the person interested takes it."

Both ladies laughed a little; but Mrs. Ray did exactly what Mrs. Wise said she would do, at her call on Esther, which followed close on their call.

She talked of Mr. Coleman's surprising secrecy; she dwelt on the youth and beauty of the bride; and she took from Esther's brief and reserved an-

swers, as well as from her altered looks, any confirmation that might possibly be lacking to the gossip of our set.

"Yes," she said at home an hour later, "it undoubtedly was a terrible shock to her. But, really, if I were in her place, I'd try to keep up appearances by being a little more offhand and hearty in talking about them. Anyone can see that it is death to her to hear what a young and lovely woman he has married."

Jane Coleman came last of all, intent on giving the first confidence on her own happiness to Esther, whom she really loved and trusted beyond all the women of her acquaintance.

But she, too, was shocked at the ashen face and hollow eyes of her friend. It was impossible not to perceive that Esther was forcing herself to enter into her friend's joy.

Then the faint suspicion that had once or twice obtruded itself into Jane's mind, as to Esther's possible feeling to Bertrand, came back strengthened.

Jane had heard a little of the current gossip, but not so far in a way which obliged her to speak a word for herself. Indeed, her thought till she had seen Esther, had been to smile at it as mere foolish speculation. She remembered it now, and it joined itself to her revived suspicions.

After all, what more natural than that any woman should fall in love with Bertrand? And Esther had

seen him in his most attractive aspect, and had no suspicion of the state of affairs between him and Miss Tremaine.

A few days more went by, and a consideration far more serious than her visibly diminished social importance forced itself upon Esther.

She was receiving no orders, and she had but little money ahead, in excess of the three hundred and fifty dollars which she was holding against her note to Mr. Coleman, which fell due in March.

Meantime the gossip gained in volume and variety. Miss Ward had heard the news suddenly in Paris, and had been found in a dead faint with Miss Coleman's letter in her hand. It was Miss Ward's illness, and not Mrs. Mint's, which had kept the travelers away two months beyond their expected time.

This was Mrs. Jones' inference, promptly accepted as a fact by many, and gaining much credit withal from Miss Ward's extreme delicacy of appearance.

Miss Ward was going to live in Rome and devote herself entirely to art, being too heartbroken to take up life again in the old familiar scenes. She had come home merely to adjust her affairs, and would sail for Italy right after the new year.

Miss Ward had been so mortified at her own foolishness in making her feelings so conspicuous in the matter of Bertrand Coleman's portrait, that she had abjured art forever, and was about to enter a convent

of contemplative nuns in New York City. This was slightly varied in another report. She was to enter an order devoted to works of mercy, in the city of her birth.

These reports being given out as with authority by several ladies who were well acquainted with her, and who claimed to be her best friends, caused Miss Ward to lose a number of orders, which admirers of her work had been holding against her return.

What was especially insisted upon by several who concerned themselves most deeply in Miss Ward's affairs, was the way that the Colemans had kept her in the dark.

That Mr. Coleman should have been reticent with her was not perhaps so strange; but that Jane, her intimate friend, should have allowed Miss Ward to go on and really compromise her reputation for delicacy and good sense, was very singular, indeed.

Mrs. Willow, it is true, had stoutly protested against this view of the case at first. She was sure Miss Ward had not done anything unsuitable. Indeed, she wouldn't have been surprised if she had refused an offer in that quarter. Everyone knew that she was devoted to her art — a statement which of course was received with derision by Mrs. Jones and a number of other matrons and maids.

"That's what all professional women say who have failed to get a husband," said Mrs. Jones.

But even Mrs. Willow could not reiterate this

defence after she had seen Esther, and noted her avoidance of conversation about the Colemans, and her continued excuses from participation in her friend's Sunday evening festivities.

Other people who had courted Esther not so much as a successful artist, but as the prospective choice of one of the leading men of the place, and a future social magnate, wasted no further time on the pale, listless woman on whom Fortune had turned her back; and repeated the gossip about her, not from malice, but just to make conversation.

Mrs. Ray and others spent much time in discussing what Esther ought to have done or left undone; and especially censured her painting of Bertrand Coleman's portrait.

Then, from no one knew just where, an uglier rumor arose.

Bertrand Coleman had been very much taken with Miss Ward, and something might have come of it; — but he had heard something. There was a very peculiar family history. All was not quite as it seemed with Miss Ward herself. She was a woman with a past. Who knew it? After all, she was here but a few years. Where had she come from? What had she been doing?

Wasn't it well that this good man had found out things before it was too late? Dear me! how careful one should be about strangers! Marriage is such a serious thing, and it would be so dreadful to get

anything off-color into one's family, whether it was a vice or only a misfortune.

Oh! those designing women! And men are so simple. If only they are flattered enough they'll let any one pull the wool over their eyes.

It is just to say that Mrs. Willow indignantly repudiated these insinuations, and dwelt earnestly on her long knowledge of the Ward family, their old-time position and means, etc. To be sure, she admitted that there was a wild streak in the men of the Ward family, and that she never could account for the way they went through their money; and these admissions were tortured into an acquiescence with much of the worst gossip, in a manner which would never have entered into Mrs. Willow's kind little heart.

It may seem strange that Jane Coleman put in no defence of her friend; but then comparatively little of the gossip reached her ears at this especial time. She was rather avoiding the society of her women friends, having a great desire to surprise them with the announcement of her engagement on the evening of the wedding reception of her brother and his wife. She had her hands full, moreover, in making her brother's house ready for its new mistress, and with preparations for her own marriage, which was to follow within a few weeks after their return.

There was still another reason why but little talk had reached this interested person; the happy

solution of her own future being as yet a secret, her friends believed that she would be very sensitive on the matter of leaving her brother. Moreover, Jane was not backward in repelling in short, sharp measure anything like impertinent curiosity about her family or personal matters; and the boldest gossip does not like to invite a snubbing.

She had no confidante save Esther; but confiding in Esther now was not the dear delight which she had anticipated.

What had wrought such a change in this erstwhile bright, sympathetic, and eminently practical woman? Jane was almost sorry now that she had asked Esther to be her bridesmaid. Those sad eyes would spoil the prettiest wedding in the world.

But she had asked her, and Esther had promised, and there was nothing for it but to go through with it; praying, meanwhile, that the latter might change her mind before it was too late to get an effective substitute.

The more Jane thought of it, the more her conviction grew, that there must be something in the rumors that connected the sad change in Esther with her brother's marriage.

Jane was too loyal alike to her friend and her brother to talk over her suspicions with any one; but she was not above making an effort now and then to "satisfy her mind" on the subject with Esther herself.

To this end she often spoke of the bride, praising her youth, her graces and charms of every kind and variety.

"You feel better, then, about her than in the beginning," ventured Esther, feeling obliged to say something. But Jane had forgotten that she ever held her brother's choice in anything but sisterly affection; and Esther remembered with sympathy the man who had complained to her once that he never could understand women.

Jane described to Esther the wedding gifts that had come in so numerously, and though she was proud to say that most of them had come from her brother's friends, still she would not allow it to be thought that the bride had not also friends of high station to remember her.

When she described the casket of jewels which was the bridegroom's gift, Jane thought that Esther winced. So she did, but not for the reason that Jane suspected.

However, as the latter was not cruel, she concluded that her mind was satisfied; and dropped the subject of her brother and his bride for one, after all, more congenial — her own happiness and her plans for her wedding, the wedding journey, and her future home.

She would be married very quietly from her brother's house on the seventh of February. They would sail immediately for Naples; remain in Italy

till May, come back by way of Paris and London, and make a little trip through Ireland.

She supposed she wouldn't fear the voyage so much as usual this time; the Major had such a way of keeping up one's courage, and making one forget one's self. Then, Mother Margaret Mary had promised that the nuns would say special prayers, and sing the "Ave Maris Stella" right through for them every day of their outgoing and returning voyage; and three priests, friends of theirs, were crossing with them.

So Jane prattled on by the hour to Esther, and felt a little annoyed sometimes that the latter was not more responsive.

Esther in her now numerous hours of solitude tried to finish her St. Dorothea, but her interest in the picture was gone. The conception of the subject which had seemed to her in the spring original and beautiful, seemed now flat and spiritless.

Mrs. Mint, who was always practical in her demonstration of friendship, thought that nothing could better divert Esther's mind from her own disappointment than plenty of hard work, and was shocked when she discovered that her young friend had no work to do.

It showed the fine nature under the somewhat rough exterior, that Mrs. Mint waited a few days before approaching this important subject.

Then she bustled in as if there were no time to be lost.

"Esther, I want a copy of your 'Forsaken Christ' just as fast as you can do it well for me. It is the order of a friend. You know it would never be my choice." Then, carelessly: "The money has been put in my hands for it, and you may as well relieve me of it, as I hate to carry other folk's cash about me."

"Oh, Mrs. Mint!" cried Esther, blushing scarlet at this generous subterfuge.

Mrs. Mint turned on her in such well-feigned indignation at having her word doubted, that Esther finally was convinced that she had made a mistake, and was undertaking a genuine order.

"She saw right through me, the little tinker!" said Mrs. Mint afterwards to Martha, "but I stood by my guns like a soldier. There's where I think it's right to lie. Of course I know Father Herman wouldn't agree with me, but one has to follow one's conscience."

"Quite so, ma'am," said Martha, with some interior amusement at Mrs. Mint's theology.

Even as a copyist Esther's hand seemed to have lost its cunning, and as the replica grew slowly under her brush, she wondered, with a chill, sick fear, if she would indeed be able to finish it.

Esther Ward was a reasonable woman; so she took herself severely to task for the thought that people looked curiously at her as she entered or left St. Mary's Church on Sundays.

"Indeed, I must be ill when I am so foolish as to imagine that anyone is noticing me," she said — but the thought came again and again, despite her best efforts.

She certainly was not well. The strain of watching and waiting; the pain of hope deferred; the anguish of the destruction of her house of love, had preyed upon her strength.

While she knew that Arthur Esmond was in reach of letter or telegram, hope, which dies so hard in us, would fitfully reassert itself. Surely he would discover his mistake; surely he would unsay those hard words that so cruelly wronged her loyal and patient love.

But when she saw that he had refused a position in the city of her home — they had both known the offer was coming, and had built upon it — in favor of one in far-away Japan, then, indeed, she felt that hope was vain, and justice unlikely till she had ceased to care for earthly things.

If I were inventing a little story whose prime purpose was edification, I would tell my readers here of Esther's prayerful resignation to the calamity which had befallen her. But to be true to life I must tell, rather, that for all the days that the shadow of coming sorrow was lengthening over her, for all the days that a spark of hope survived in her heart, her prayer was: "O, my Father, let this chalice pass from me!"

And when it did not pass, but was pressed momently to her shrinking lips, her word to Heaven, from dawn to dark and through the night-watches, was: "Why, my God, why?"

She told herself that for her sins she deserved any suffering that could possibly come upon her; but her reason answered that this was true of all poor sinners. This sorrow was not the logical outcome of a sin. It could not then, she reasoned, be God's will. Why was it His permission?

It was a test for heroic faith.

So you see that Esther was not at all like the devout heroines of certain Sunday-school books, who are saints from the start; but a poor little natural woman, thirsting for a full draught of that earthly happiness of which she had barely tasted; and overvaluing it, as the child overvalues the long-coveted toy that is snatched from him just as he has grasped it, and broken in his sight.

Yet Esther was an earnest Catholic, too deeply thoughtful and analytic of her own mental processes to dare to take upon her lips a prayer which found as yet no echo in her heart; and though she abased her soul before her Maker, all lowly as the clay before the potter, she was too honest with herself to utter aught but what she felt, before the All-Knowing, who is

> "Closer to us than breathing,
> And nearer than hands or feet."

It was the liturgy of Bethlehem in the Church, but of Gethsemane in her heart, and she could not say: "Thy will be done."

. . . . . .

"I guess the folks don't know you're home yet, Miss Ward," said her housekeeper, as she came in with Esther from their Communion Mass on Christmas morning, and the latter glanced at the poor little array of gifts on the table in her studio.

A year ago, her faithful attendant had complained to one of her cronies that she had been "most run off her feet with waitin' on the door to take in baskets and boxes and bundles of everything you could think of, that folks were sendin' to Miss Ward."

Indeed, her little home had been beautiful with all manner of Christmas thoughtfulness, and gay with flowers that day and for many days thereafter. But few and far between, out of all who had remembered her a year ago, were those who had kept her in mind today.

Esther thought of the long and loving letter, the cablegram, and the splendid gift that had greeted her from Arthur Esmond on Christmas morning a year ago; and she saw not what she did, as she cut the strings of the few little boxes or slit the card envelopes before her.

After all, what mattered it any more who remembered or who forgot?

Jane Coleman wrote her, with a little silver stamp-

case, that she had been making her the prettiest centerpiece for her dining-room table; but with the turn affairs had taken, it had to be laid aside till after her wedding journey; for now her hands and her heart were so full.

Mrs. Willow sent her a pair of slippers, writing that she felt just now her dear friend would like something personal; and Mrs. Ray sent the children's photographs, writing that "under present circumstances" she felt dear Miss Ward would like them for their associations, and also because they were portable.

Esther read these last two notes with mild surprise. Why should "personal" or "portable" objects be more to her now than at any past time?

But as a gift was dear to Esther only as representing the loving thought of the giver, she concluded that the unwonted explanations meant nothing in particular; and setting the little Rays' pictures upon her desk, prepared for the ordeal of Christmas dinner and the children's Christmas-tree at her brother's house.

She had begged him to devise some excuse to Mollie — who knew nothing of her sad experience — and allow her to spend the day in retirement; but partly under the mistaken notion that the household festivities would divert Esther's mind, and partly because his little boys had set their hearts on having her, Joe would not further her plan.

"Esther, you have borne up under so many hard things," he said, "bear up under this now. It is worst of all for you to be alone with your own thoughts."

So Esther went, and frolicked with the baby, and praised Mollie's Christmas dinner, and helped unload the Christmas tree, and told Christmas stories till she was hoarse, to her insatiable little nephews, and thanked Heaven when another day dawned and she could get back to her city solitude.

Yet perhaps her brother was right, she mused, as she vainly tried to apply to her copy of the promised picture. She must overcome this disposition to morbid thought. She must work while life was left, though certainly her power of concentration on any subject but her sorrow was greatly weakened.

Why should she shrink like this from meeting her fellow-creatures — her friends?

There would be reason in it if she had been so foolish as to have confided her engagement to any of them; but as it was, there was nothing to be explained.

It was purely a morbid notion on her part that of those who had come to see her, only Mrs. Ormond had behaved naturally.

Her friends had not fallen away from her. It was she who, by her severe seclusion since her return from Europe, had fallen away from them.

No doubt Ellen was right. Half her friends were not aware of her return.

Going mechanically over her mail, she came on the card announcing the usual holiday entertainment of the Daughters of St. Paula on the thirtieth.

Yes. Here was the point for a new departure. She would go. Why not?

It was a crisp, bright winter afternoon; and her brisk walk to the assembly rooms brought a slight color to her cheeks. She had taken a little more than ordinary pains with her toilet; and looked very sweet, refined and frail, thought Mrs. Ormond, as she came in alone to the parlors, gay with evergreen and holly, and already filled with a merry, talkative crowd of stylish women and girls.

The "call to order" had not yet been given, but as Esther was seen approaching a group of the Daughters, a hush fell upon them with a suddenness and completeness which had never been achieved by Miss May's olivewood and silver gavel.

It was so marked that Esther, for once thrown off her guard, stood for a second irresolute and astonished. Then as she turned to the group just across the aisle, the same thing befell.

Mrs. Ormond, who had been watching her with anxious eyes, while striving to detach herself from a clinging young person at the head of the hall, now moved toward Esther with cordial greeting, and hurried her up to a seat in the front between herself and Mrs. Mint. The same palpable silence, the same curious gaze followed them.

Esther's brain whirled; but she was hardly seated when Miss May advanced to her place, gave the signal, and the little programme of essays and Christmas poems, interspersed with Christmas carols, began.

"Take me home, for Heaven's sake, just as soon as this is over," whispered Esther to Mrs. Mint, as the programme drew to its last number; and with a hurried greeting to Miss May they crossed to the dressing-room, and made their way out by the private entrance.

"You are not well; can't we come in and do something for you?" entreated Mrs. Ormond, as the carriage stopped at Esther's door; but she assured them it was but a trifle, and begged not to detain them from their dinner engagement.

So scrupulous were these two otherwise strangely mated friends of Esther, in regard to her feelings, that they refrained from discussing the occurrence.

Esther never closed her eyes that night. What did it all mean? Evidently something of her affairs was known; but what? and how?

Her flesh tingled as she went over and over again her experience at the Christmas festival of the Daughters of St. Paula, and saw above it all, in its frame of smilax, in letters of light, the season's greeting: "PEACE ON EARTH, AND GOOD-WILL TO MEN."

CHAPTER XXII.

ESTHER'S PUZZLE EXPLAINED.

At last — was it by hypnotic suggestion? — a new thought came to Esther.

Why linger here, where it was clear that her fortunes had fallen; and where, with the depressing memory of happier things, she could not rally her forces to reconstruct them?

She thought of the peaceful convent, where a dozen years ago she had been an instructor. The nuns would welcome her back; and for a season she could give special classes in their own normal school; and in the holy and restful atmosphere regain something of her lost power and energy.

She thanked God for the thought, and in the strength of it rose, made her toilet, took her coffee, and addressed herself to the completion of her order.

The day was yet young when Jack Holmwood dropped in, and began offering her suggestions for new pictures — impracticable, as all his suggestions were wont to be, but kindly meant; for he loved Esther like a brother, and the sight of her white face and sunken eyes cut him to the heart.

"It's no use, Jack," she said at last, "I can

attempt no original work now. I must let my mind lie fallow for a while. I am going away for six months or a year to teach at Bethany Convent" —

"And play into the hands of all those creatures who are gossiping about you!" cried Jack, rising in his indignant surprise.

"Gossiping — about me — Jack!" she cried faintly.

"Why, Esther, don't you know they are? Don't you know what they are saying about you and Bertrand Coleman?" —

"About me — and Bertrand Coleman!" she repeated with a stupefied stare.

"What do they say? — who says it?"

"Why, that his marriage has broken your heart — that it is the cause of your failed health and seclusion — that you can't face the world again — that you are going to enter a convent."

"Oh, Jack, who says these things?" she moaned.

"Why, who says them? Nearly all the women you know are saying them. Your story is told at everyone's Day — confound them and their Days! — at their Whist Clubs, their Sewing Societies, every place your name is mentioned where even two or three of them have got together. Brace up, Esther. You can't afford to throw away your life like this."

Esther stood facing him now, with the pitiless light of the sunshiny winter morning on her worn face.

She stood silent, and Jack shifted uneasily at the look of dismay and anguish with which she regarded him.

"Esther," he said, when he could bear it no longer, "perhaps I have done wrong to tell all this stuff to you; but I thought you must know it. I thought it was the cause of your shutting yourself up alone here. I wanted to rouse your courage. Dear friend," he cried desperately, taking both her hands in his, "tell me that I have not hurt you where I meant to help!"

"Jack, do you believe these things about me?" she asked.

"Well, Esther, remembering your intimacy with the Colemans, I did think there was something in them; but now, before Heaven, I'll take your word against all the circumstantial evidence in the world."

"Jack, there is no foundation for them; but I can't do anything to help myself against them. You say they tell my story. They don't know it; and matters might be worse than they are if they did. That is all I can say, Jack."

"But Esther, you won't go to Bethany Convent?"

"No, Jack; I will stay here now, no matter what comes."

. . . . . .

So all were now explained: the funereal calls, the furtive, curious glances, the falling away of friends, the dwindling of her means of subsistence.

She was now in the eyes of the little coterie who had heretofore been so lavish of their praise and attentions, simply that most commonplace and contemptible of failures — the ambitious workingwoman baffled in her determined quest of a rich husband and an easy life; the woman who had been too open in her preference, too ready with her time and conversation for a man who had enjoyed her as a temporary diversion, until the hour had come for the queen of his house and heart; or, at best, that pitiable weak thing — the woman who had given her heart unasked.

Now Esther knew why Mrs. Willow so ostentatiously avoided all mention of the Colemans; and why Mrs. Ray so industriously rang the changes on them; why Mrs. Macduff had prodded her with questions as to whether she had been home in time to see Mr. Coleman before he went to Cleveland; and when, and how, and where she had received the news of the engagement; why Fanny Brown had been so profuse in her regrets that dear Miss Ward should have come home just at this time, when she was looking so delicate, and was so unable to endure trying things!

Esther, lying on the little sofa in her studio, as the short winter day drew to its close, felt the blood in her veins now fire, now ice, as she realized her terrible position, and writhed at her helplessness to change it.

For what would it serve her to proclaim the fact that she was not the woman forsaken of the man with whose name hers had been coupled, since she was the forsaken of another whose name had never been heard among them ?

She went forlornly over every incident in her nearly two years' acquaintance with the Colemans. Her conscience acquitted her before heaven and earth of thought or word or act disloyal in a woman betrothed, or unseemly in any woman.

Her friendship with Bertrand Coleman had been absolutely open and above board. She had never written a line or spoken a word to him that might not have been published in the newspapers.

Indeed, she had never had a private conversation with him, except when he came to the rescue in the case of Ned's defalcation, and when he freely and most unexpectedly gave her his confidence on his own love affair.

She had lived too large a life both in her profession and in society, to attach importance to the little attentions which kindly and courteous men offer without a thought of possible misconstruction to any agreeable woman, or to the friends of their women kindred.

His effective intervention in behalf of her brother was, of course, the proof of a more than ordinary good will ; and Esther's gratitude was none the less for her conviction that he might have done as much for any one of ten friends, in the same strait.

Then no one, not even Jane, knew of this passage in their friendship, nor how gratitude had warmed her heart and brought enthusiastic words to her lips when Mr. Coleman was spoken of in her presence.

What, then, had gossip had to build itself upon?

True, she had eagerly embraced the opportunity to show her gratitude to the man who had saved her brother, and incidentally herself, from deep disgrace, by acceding to Jane's wish for a portrait from her hand.

But what of that? Who knew that she was not filling an order? Had she not painted the portraits of a dozen men of every age and condition? To her they were simply subjects; to them she felt herself merely the artist.

Long before she had thought of the graceful compliment of Bertrand Coleman's portrait for his sister, Esther had made memory sketches of him, slightly idealized, for Theophilus in the picture of St. Dorothea, on which she was already brooding. She recalled her glow of artistic enthusiasm at her first sight of this splendid man at Mrs. Ray's; but she knew that her enthusiasm would have been as ardent and outspoken for a beautiful woman or child.

Ah, well! she would be honest with herself. There was one portrait from her hand in which it had been nerved by something more than artistic enthusiasm. She had looked into her own heart for the model. But it was not Bertrand Coleman's.

"Oh, Arthur! Arthur!" she moaned; "and you have left me to this shame and desolation."

She rose, made the light, and unveiling with the rod of her torch the picture hung in the alcove just a little higher than her hand could reach, gazed at it long and sadly.

A handsome face it was, too, though in strong contrast to Bertrand Coleman's dark beauty. A fair-complexioned man with hair

"That made his forehead like a rising sun,"

as Tennyson wrote of his blameless king. In life the blue eyes were often cold and the mouth stern; but he had never showed this face to Esther; and her memory gave to the canvas what it held, glorified.

It was characteristic of the woman that now, since all was over between her and Arthur Esmond, she felt she had no right to this picture; yet she shrank from destroying it almost as she would have shrunk from taking life. Had she not breathed the life of her heart into it?

Oh, if he had but come to her, albeit in anger, one sight of this picture must have cleared his mind of every doubt!

But why did he doubt her? There was not one chance in ten thousand that any of this miserable gossip had reached his ears.

He was but twenty-four hours in the city of her home, and it was thence he had cabled her on board the "New Amsterdam."

He had many acquaintances but few friends in this city. She had been his only correspondent. There was no time for visiting or receiving visits during his short stay; and as no one knew of their engagement, who would dream of mentioning her name to him in any event?

So poor Esther reasoned on the sometimes most misleading basis of the strongest probability; but only to find herself striking once more against the viewless but most real barrier that had so strangely arisen between her and Arthur Esmond.

Then her womanly pride rose up, desperate at the current misrepresentation of her position — a misrepresentation in which she was now forced to concur.

Oh, if even one wise and tactful friend had known of her engagement, the tide of mischievous gossip might have been stemmed!

She recalled the day when, pleased and proud at Bertrand Coleman's confidence, she had been moved from her own wonted reticence, and on the point of revealing her happy secret to him. Would to God she had obeyed this prompting of her Guardian Angel!

True, the man had been so full of his own heart's desire that he missed the meaning of her timid beginning; but she could have written, and what a friend this chivalrous man had been in her present trouble!

Then with a sudden sickening accession of horror came this thought: Had the gossip reached him? If it had not before his marriage, it would certainly meet him and his bride on their return; for her own experience and Jack Holmwood's revelations proved to her that it was still at high tide.

Jack had confessed that he himself had thought there was "something in it." So evidently thought even those of her friends who were not among those "best friends" industriously circulating the gossip.

What would Bertrand Coleman think? Of what disposition was his bride?

As this vista of new and humiliating probabilities opened before her Esther hid her face in the cushions, and all the billows and seas of pain and shame swept over her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WEDDING RECEPTION.

When Esther had promised to vindicate herself by facing her real bereavement and the current gossip and misconstruction as if they were not, she had overestimated not her will, but her physical strength.

Heretofore she had always been able to find in her work a tonic and in her trust in God a comfort, till the day of strain and cloud had passed. But now her hand had lost its skill, and Heaven was shut to her prayer.

Her moments of feverish activity in mixing her colors and arranging the lights and shades were barren of further result.

Her plans for her honorable extrication from the web which circumstances had woven about her, were equally futile.

She remembered her half-contemptuous pity for the women who were constantly dilating on their past matrimonial chances; or reciting the story of their dead lovers; or confiding to whomsoever would listen, some "secret" which had been solemnly confided to them.

Today she, for saving her brother's honor and her

friend's confidence, and maintaining what she believed to be a self-respectful reticence about her purely personal affairs, was in a worse plight in the eyes of her little world than the weakest self-revealer or the meanest betrayer of trust.

"Why, my God, why?" she prayed with heavier heart than ever, marveling the while that so much sorrow and shame should come of her best loyalty and honor.

She would now, in this sore extremity, have opened her heart to Father Herman, were it but in the hope that Heaven would grant to his prayers the answer denied to hers; but though she carefully chose the hour, his confessional was already surrounded, for it was the eve of the Epiphany and of the First Friday, besides. So she was fain to be satisfied with her ordinary confession; and though the fatherly heart of the good old priest ached for his spiritual child, he knew her reticent nature so well that he feared but to increase her sorrow by any word unsuggested by her own initiative.

On the Monday evening following was the wedding reception of Mr. and Mrs. Coleman.

Esther would go with the Ormonds. Mrs. Mint was down with one of her bad bronchial attacks; and the victim of her "best friends'" misdirected interest was too honest to play the hypocrite with any of them.

"Indeed, she just froze me out when I went over

and asked her to come to the reception with me," complained Mrs. Ray.

"She declined my invitation to take her, too," said Mrs. Willow; "and it's quite a different kind of a note from any I ever got from her before. Now you know, Sister Wise, that I held out the very longest against believing things, and I don't believe some things even yet. Now if I had been like Mrs. Jones" —

"Mrs. Jones was always prejudiced against her," said Mrs. Wise.

"I should think she'd be glad to have women of our position make of her just as if nothing had happened," went on Mrs. Ray, a little querulously; "but she was always as high-strung and sensitive as if she were a princess."

"Perhaps she's not going, after all," ventured Mrs. Wise.

"Oh, she'll go if it killed her," rejoined Mrs. Ray. "Mrs. Jones is going to stand right up by the bride and groom till after Miss Ward has offered her congratulations."

"Now that's downright cruel," commented Mrs. Willow; "though of course we'd all like to see how nicely she does it."

"I hope she won't go, poor thing," sighed Mrs. Wise, with real feeling.

Indeed Mrs. Ormond, with all her kindness and tact, did her best to dissuade Esther from attending the reception.

"Of course, dear, it's natural you would like to be with your friends that evening, but you really don't look well enough; and there's sure to be a crush."

But Esther had been spared nothing. A number of other friends considered it their duty to tell her the most humiliating and cruel of the stories in circulation about her, which, of course, lost nothing in the telling; and she had received through the mail, addressed in a disguised hand, a marked copy of *Social Events.*

Noting the date of it, she saw that it was of the week of Arthur Esmond's brief stay in the city.

"But he wouldn't touch a paper like this with a ten-foot pole," thought the loyal woman.

"Yes, Mrs. Ormond, I will surely go," she said quickly; "unless, indeed, you have some personal reason for not wishing to take me."

For all answer her friend's arms were about her.

"We'll drive over and get you at eight o'clock," she said.

. . . . . .

The Coleman residence was ablaze with light from attic to basement. The florists' deft hands, directed by Jane's exquisite taste, had achieved decorative effects never before equalled at any festive occasion in our set.

In the spacious front hall and dining-room were the evergreen, holly and ivy of the Northern

Christmas, harmonized with the palms and foliage plants of the tropics.

In the double drawing-room above there were only palms, myrtles and roses.

It was roses, roses everywhere; great Jacqueminots just opened or budding into bloom, and filling the warm air with their delicious fragrance.

The music floated up through the house, never too gay nor overpowering, but dreamy and sweet, and with the joy that is almost pain breathing through its cadences. It was music's golden tongue, flattering to tears, like that which Madeline heard ere she lay down to dream on St. Agnes' eve; and for a little space it soothed Esther's sad soul tenderly.

Mrs. Ormond had planned to come and go early, for Esther's sake. As they rejoined Mr. Ormond at the drawing-room door, however, she saw that a goodly array of guests were already gathered.

They moved slowly up to the farther end, where Mr. and Mrs. Coleman were stationed, Jane and Major McAlpine — the news of whose engagement had somehow filtered out without a formal announcement — receiving with them.

Esther knew that many a curious and not too kindly gaze would be upon her; and she who had not heretofore known the meaning of self-consciousness, had planned — poor heart! — with what calm dignity she would bear it, and just what her words of greeting would be to the bride and groom.

She had never reckoned on the battery of eyes that bore down upon her as she lifted her own at the announcement of her name, and extended her hand in greeting to the bride.

Mrs. Jones had been as good as her word. She was standing almost in line with the bridal party; and perhaps a dozen more of the best-known matrons and maids of our set were grouped at each side of it.

Esther flushed, paled and trembled, and her greeting was inaudible. The bride's finger-tips touched her palm, but Bertrand Coleman took her hand into his strong grasp, and beaming with pleasure said to his wife:

"Miss Ward is one of our dearest friends, Annette."

Whereupon the bride flashed forth her sunniest smile, and put out her hand again with real cordiality. But from Esther's pale lips no audible word came, for the eyes pierced her to the bone, and she was conscious of a faint titter in Mrs. Jones' neighborhood.

Bertrand Coleman had noticed her momentary embarrassment, but not its cause, and had certainly done his best to cover it. So had the bride, but with that slight impatience which a young and beautiful woman would naturally feel at the thought of such a shy, ghostlike creature as the woman who had just passed before her ever having loved or been loved.

The Ormonds and Esther made way for Mr. and Mrs. Brown and their daughter Fanny, the last-named of whom had devoured the meeting over Mr. Ormond's shoulder with greedy eyes.

"What roses, Mrs. Ormond! did you ever see the like?"

"The bride is a perfect June rose herself. Don't you think so, Miss Ward?"

It was Mrs. Jones who spoke, and Esther had quite recovered her composure.

"I think she is a very lovely girl," she answered quietly.

"Aren't they just made for each other?" cried Mrs. Wise, with enthusiasm. "I always said he was a king among men, and now he has found a queen among women. Don't you think so, Miss Ward?"

Queenly, however, was hardly the descriptive term for the dainty blonde, scarcely five feet two, who was to her stalwart husband like a statue of Parian marble beside a majestic bronze.

Very beautiful were the rose-tints of her delicate skin, her soft, curling hair of childish gold, her great blue eyes, and the smile that made such enchanting dimples in her cheeks and prettily rounded chin; but there was slight suggestion of strength of mind or character.

Esther answered again: "She is a very lovely girl, and they are most happily contrasted."

Mrs. Ray caught Mrs. Jones' eye on the words.

"You notice," whispered the latter, "that it just chokes her to say a good word of the bride."

Mrs. Willow was in the group which had nearly closed around Esther, detaching her somewhat from the Ormonds; but she said nothing; and once she had caught Esther's reproachful eyes upon her, heartily wished that her curiosity had not got the best of her good feeling earlier in the evening.

She attempted a diversion now.

"If you haven't seen the presents you ought to go down now to the library, while the crowd is up here."

"I am going with Mrs. Ormond directly," answered Esther coldly, as her friend finally succeeded in wedging herself back to her between the portly forms of Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Ray.

The ladies were silent till the retreating figures were beyond earshot.

"She would have made a bad break but for Mr. Coleman," said Mrs. Jones, with a dry chuckle.

"He certainly is a perfect gentleman; but I suppose he felt sorry for her," suggested Mrs. Macduff.

"Don't you think it was so many people staring at her that embarrassed her?" put in Mrs. Willow. "I felt rather mean myself when she looked up that time, so kind of startled and pitiful."

"Oh, pshaw! Mrs. Willow, you are much too sentimental," said Mrs. Jones, moving off to another group, where, it may be added, she was far less

ardent in her praises of the bride and groom, and even confided to one of the matrons that she had always thought Bertrand Coleman a man of sense until this; that the evident disparity in their years was something shocking; that Jane had done well to take this chance, as it was of a certainty her last; and that she had thought better of the Colemans than the meanness of a wedding reception without wine, but she supposed they had to have it so, for fear that the Major would make a show of himself.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A HARVEST OF THORNY ROSES.

THE guests had gone, and Bertrand Coleman had betaken himself to the library, where, with the lights lowered he was enjoying a quiet cigar, while his wife and sister lingered in the drawing-room for a desultory discussion of the events of the evening.

From above floated the music of the Major's really fine tenor, as he sang the last stanza of Boyle O'Reilly's "Jacqueminots."

My roses tell her, pleading, all the fondness and the sighing,
All the longing of a heart that reaches thirsting for its bliss;
And tell her, tell her, roses, that my lips and eyes are dying
For the melting of her love-look and the rapture of her kiss.

But evidently some disagreeable reminiscence intruded itself into the pleasant musings of this happy bridegroom, whose heart had been so gratified by his friends' praises of his Rose of the World.

He recalled the evident embarrassment of Esther Ward that evening, with the same unpleasant perplexity that he remembered experiencing for a few moments, at his last sitting in her studio the preceding June.

Could there be some truth, after all, in these strange reports about her?

For the gossip had been inescapable since his return with his bride. When it invaded his house through some of its familiars, he scouted it as a gentleman should, especially when it took the form of solicitude for the life or the mind of "the woman forsaken."

Yet certainly it was but the wraith of the oldtime Esther Ward that he had beheld tonight. He remembered that he had been struck with the change in her appearance before she went to Europe with Mrs. Mint, but had laid it all to overwork and her anxiety about her brother. But this further change was something appalling.

Had this poor woman really grown to care for him without realizing it? to build, perhaps, a little on the grave uncertainties which he had confided to her; and to dream that in the event of a disappointment his heart might come to her in its rebound?

Now Bertrand Coleman was not a vain man, but he was only a man; and though he would not for worlds have put these thoughts into speech, yet his unpleasant perplexity began now to be modified by something very like complacence, that so good and clever a woman as Esther Ward should be pining away for his sake.

He pulled himself up in a moment.

"Oh, you infernal cad!" he muttered, flinging

away his cigar-stump, and holding out his arms to his wife, who was just trailing her dainty draperies across the threshold.

But she stood off from him coyly.

"What bad name were you calling somebody just now?" she demanded.

"I must have been thinking of my own vanity, Midget," he said, smiling lazily.

"Thinking about Miss Esther Ward, maybe," she ventured, with a spice of mischief. "The idea of a woman who looks like that imagining that anyone could possibly be in love with her. She ought to be 'making her soul,' as our old nurse used to say."

"She didn't always look like that, my pet," said the husband softly.

"Oh, she didn't! Well," with a malicious gleam in her eyes, "it's a pity you didn't realize her beauty in time, and do something to save it."

"She was never beautiful, Annette, though she was a pleasing and gracious woman; but her beauty, if she had been as lovely — as yourself — would not have been my concern," he rejoined gravely.

The little bride tossed her head and pouted her full red lips, looking at him meanwhile from under her cloud of golden curls like a vexed child.

"How could she ever suppose that a man like you could care for her?" she said at last.

"She never supposed it, my dearest."

"Well, everybody says she was just wild about you."

"'Everybody' is a great crowd, child."

"You know very well what I mean; all the people I've met since I came here."

"They are all wrong, Annette. She never gave me a thought, except as a friend."

"Well, what made her so nervous this evening? And why did you single her out beyond any one else as one of your dearest friends?"

"I said 'our,' my darling," said Bertrand Colemon patiently, evading the question he could not answer.

"I don't like her, and I won't have her for my friend — so there!"

The man kept silence, and the spoiled child still stood frowning and pouting at him. Then —

"Bertrand! How do you know she wouldn't have had you? Did you ever ask her?"

"My dear little girl, no word of anything approaching to love or marriage ever passed between this good and sensible friend and myself."

"Well, why did she paint your picture? Jane says she did it of her own accord."

Bertrand Coleman wished for a moment that his sister was young enough to have her ears boxed.

"Miss Ward believed herself to be under some little obligations to us," he said finally, "and this was her graceful way of acknowledging them."

"I'd like to know what they were!" exclaimed the little beauty haughtily. "You take her part so, I

can't help thinking you had some secret between you."

"Annette!" His voice was reproachful and almost stern.

She still looked at him from under her curls, but her frown had passed. She drew a little nearer, but he gave no sign. She laid one little hand on the arm of his chair, and with the finger-tips of the other touched his fingers.

"Bertrand!" There were tears in the uplifted eyes and her voice trembled. "Kiss me! I'm good now," and she put up her lips like a little child.

"But I can't help it, dear. You had so many friends before I came into your life — and — and — I'm tempted — to hate them all."

The man gathered her up in his arms, and was happy again in reassuring her impassioned and exacting love.

"Listen, Annette," he said, "Miss Ward and I had one secret between us. I told her of my love for you long before I dared to hope for our present happiness. Is my little wife and baby girl satisfied with this confession?"

"Oh, Bertrand, forgive me! I will never doubt you again."

And he knew she would keep her word — for twenty-four hours, perhaps.

CHAPTER XXV.

ESTHER BREAKS SILENCE.

THE slight strength that had carried Esther but indifferently through the hard ordeal she had set for herself, was all gone now, and she lay languidly back in the carriage beside Mrs. Ormond, taking no part in the conversation which this good friend and her husband considerately kept up for her sake.

She was conscious only of grieved wonder at the behavior of the women who had so lately been proclaiming themselves her friends, and to whom her heart had gone out in real tenderness. But she was too weak and tired for resentment.

How insincere their smiles, and how cruel their small, white, even teeth looked. And she shuddered as she thought how often in past times every one of them had kissed her.

Of course she was unjust, as people under grievous misconstruction sometimes are, to all these ladies. None of them had the remotest intention of cruelty, nor supposed at all that their especial share in the gossip had got back to Esther.

They merely had exercised what they considered their right to talk when others were talking, and

their natural and permissible curiosity to see how Esther would bear herself in a trying situation.

Even Mrs. Jones, though she had never liked Esther, had not meant to be cruel to her at this particular time. She had merely judged the woman by herself, and behaved to her as if she were of equally coarse fibre.

The incident at the reception had for them all the fascination of a scene in a play or a passage in a new novel.

To be sure, Mrs. Willow was not entirely at ease, but even she was carried away finally by the crowd, and went home trying to silence her conscience by getting up a grievance against Esther, who, she declared to Mrs. Wise, had positively snubbed her before everybody!

Esther made no protest when she heard the carriage drive off with Mr. Ormond, and heard Mrs. Ormond telling Ellen that she meant to spend the night, and the latter's relieved utterance: "Oh, I'm so glad, for the life and soul is worried out of me about her, poor dear!"

Nothing mattered any more to Esther. She was passive under Mrs. Ormond's kind hands as the latter removed her wraps.

"And now, dear, I'll light up in your bedroom, and get you into your wrapper, and take out all those hairpins"—

Something falling with a crash arrested her

speech. Turning in the direction of the sound, Mrs. Ormond saw that the covered picture hanging in the alcove had fallen, carrying a bit of the molding with it, and loosening its veil.

She hastened to lift it.

"Why, Arthur Esmond!" she cried in amazement. "Esther, do you know Arthur Esmond?"

The woman looked up listlessly.

"Yes, I know Arthur Esmond. I was engaged to him, and this was to have been our wedding day."

Mrs. Ormond sat down on the sofa beside her friend, with a whiter face than hers. But Esther saw it not, nor noted the excitement in Mrs. Ormond's eyes and manner.

"Esther, tell me what all this means. I must know it."

"I hardly know myself," she answered in a low, tired voice. "I was engaged for nearly three years to Arthur Esmond. He thought it best to have no announcement till he came on here from Hawaii this Fall. You know how I was delayed abroad through Mrs. Mint's illness. He cabled me of his arrival here the day we sailed from Liverpool. I have never seen him since, nor heard from him, except in two short notes from Washington in answer to my own letters, charging me with something, some disloyalty to him — I know not what."

Her voice broke with a dry sob; and Mrs. Ormond's face was full of trouble.

Esther spoke again. "There was something, a family matter, on which, perhaps, I owed him a fuller confidence than I gave him. It was hard to write it; I was waiting till we met."

"Yes," said Mrs. Ormond anxiously; for Esther had relapsed once more into a strange, lethargic silence.

"Perhaps the thing I should have told him came to him some other way. . . . What else could it have been? He was not here long enough — less than twenty-four hours — for any of that dreadful gossip to have reached him. . . . You know. . . . about Mr. Coleman."

Mrs. Ormond's heart fairly bounded, and a faint, sickening sensation came over her. She was beginning to understand.

"He knows so few people here," Esther went on, "except in a business way. He wrote me last summer that he had known you before your marriage, but of course he had no time for calls in one day."

Mrs. Ormond kept silence. What use were explanations now?

"How did it start . . . that talk about me . . . you know?" she asked, after a little.

"So there was never anything but friendship between you and Bertrand Coleman?"

Esther roused to a quick, indignant flash.

"How could there be? Haven't I told you I was engaged to Arthur Esmond? Mr. Coleman was very

kind to me once . . . in that matter . . . that I should perhaps have explained to Arthur. . . . It was last March, when I was in a sudden and great trouble, and he came. . . . I am under the greatest obligations to Mr. Coleman."

Last March! Mrs. Ormond was a woman of good memory and keen insight. She thought of Ned, of whose brief term with Frost & North she knew more than Esther dreamed. Last March! Why, that was the time of Ned's abrupt disappearance. The tangle was unravelling.

She smoothed her friend's thin, feverish hand.

"It was one day soon after, that Jane said she would like her brother's portrait from my hands. I impulsively offered to do it for her. . . . I was under great obligations," she repeated wearily.

"There was no mystery about it. No one knew that it wasn't an order. Ever so many people dropped in during the last sittings."

"One word, Esther," interrupted Mrs. Ormond. "Did you know that Bertrand Coleman was going to be married?"

"Why, yes. He told me of his hopes while matters were still very uncertain — I may say that much, now that all is happily settled — and wrote me twice about the progress of his affair while I was abroad. Jane had told me of it, too, in all its stages. But she was unhappy about it at first, and there were even graver reasons for silence — and I had given my word."

"You poor child!" murmured Mrs. Ormond.

"What had they to make a story of?" she asked, with piteous eyes. "I never talked of my affairs with any of them. I never betrayed the trusts they put in me, and some of them used to say they were my friends. I believed them. But do friends destroy your life? People stand away from me now, as if I had done some wrong. . . . I don't get any more orders . . . just that since I came back. . . . It isn't finished," she said with a wan smile, indicating the replica of "The Forsaken Christ," "but after I have had one good sleep I will give it the last touches. What am I going to do? When I promised Jack Holmwood I would stay, I didn't dream how hard it would be. Did you notice those women tonight? I can see their eyes yet, wherever I look. I never did them any wrong . . . they used to be my friends." . . .

The brief animation had died down.

"Come, dear, I am going to put you to bed," said Mrs. Ormond.

Esther rose languidly. "Wait, I must say a little prayer first. Why has God let me be broken on the wheel like this — defaced and degraded — in sight of the world — for my silence? People used to say I was proud. Think of me telling all this . . . I never said so much as this before about myself to anyone. But all is over now between Arthur and me, and nothing matters any more."

. . . . . .

Mrs. Ormond sat for an hour beside the bed bathing Esther's hot forehead. Finally her patient feigned sleep, and she lay down half-dressed on the sofa near her, leaving only a carefully shaded lamp burning on the little altar.

Esther lay long with wide open eyes, staring at the shadows. She was no longer restless, but soothed and quiet. She felt no shame that Mrs. Ormond knew the whole sad truth. The curious eyes that had burned her very flesh a few hours ago faded out. She felt no more wonder nor pain.

How still the night was! The faint gleam from the lamp was suddenly swallowed up in billows of soft red-brown, on which she seemed to rise and drift away, away into rest.

From far off a strange, sweet Voice besought her: "*I have called thee as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit.*"

Fainter and sweeter the Voice: "*I have called thee as a woman forsaken*" —

Then Esther rose up all fearless on a great dark red billow, and a mightier one towered and broke over her, blotting out consciousness.

. . . . . .

Meantime Mrs. Ormond lay on her narrow couch, almost fearing to breathe lest she disturb the supposed sleeper, her own heart full of pain and self-reproach.

Now she knew all. She had heard Mrs. Jones

discussing at the Daughters of St. Paula the dinner at which Arthur Esmond had been her guest; for she never kept silence on anything which she believed would add to her social importance.

Arthur Esmond had sought his old acquaintance for some word of reassurance about Esther, and she, Esther's friend, had destroyed the last prospect of an understanding.

What though she had not the faintest knowledge of their relations?

Mrs. Ormond was stern in her judgment of herself, and could find no excuse in her heart for what she now condemned as her uncalled-for reference to the *Social Events'* paragraph and Esther Ward.

To be sure, she was indignant at Arthur Esmond, and marvelled, as perhaps you marvel, dear reader, that a woman like Esther could love this Puritanical and jealous man.

"But I've often wondered at the sort of men good women love," she mused; "there is only one Frederick Ormond in the world."

She wasted little time, though, in abstract reflections. Since Esther had loved, and still loved, this man, something must be done to set her right before him.

"If there's any good left in him, he'll just be scorched with shame when he knows the truth," she reflected; and she fully intended to assist the scorching process herself.

She knew he was going to Japan; but had he really sailed? Might he not still be in San Francisco? Her husband might be able to ascertain that.

Then, to stop the gossips' tongues. She knew better than poor Esther the length and breadth of the mischief they had wrought.

"And to think that I had a part in it," she whispered in an agony of self-contempt. "I, who held myself so far above them!"

Was any reparation possible? She would try for it; and with Mrs. Ormond that meant it would go hard with her, or she would achieve it.

The late wintry dawn stole in through the closed shutters. She looked at her patient.

"Telephone for Doctor Allen at once!" she cried, rushing out to Ellen, who was preparing the breakfast.

Within an hour Ellen had subordinated all other duties to the nursing of her "dear lady," as she loved to call Esther; for the experienced eyes of the physician saw danger; and Mrs. Ormond went home to begin her mission of reparation.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TURN OF THE TIDE.

It was the midmonth meeting of the Daughters of St. Paula, and although the weather was disagreeable — slush underfoot, clouds overhead, and the unseasonable warmth in the air that comes with the January thaw — there was a good attendance.

Miss May was relieving the severity of the regular course on the "Ten Persecutions of the Primitive Christians" by devoting this one meeting every month to a discussion of the Lyrics of Shakespeare.

The President of the Aubrey de Vere Reading Circle gave its midmonth meeting to current fiction. Miss May, although she was much too kind and courteous to criticise a rival organization, considered, away down in her heart, that there was a frivolous streak in the rival president, and it was enough for her to know that Miss Eleanor Corey had decided on one course of action, for her to take the opposite course.

Miss May was a splendid Shakespearian scholar, and sometimes so lost herself in a dissertation on the play assigned for study that the programme of regular work had to be crowded or put over.

It promised to be so today, when "Much Ado About Nothing" was under consideration. In vain the long-threatening rain descended in torrents, blurring the window-panes; in vain the phenomena of thunder and lightning in midwinter. Miss May placidly pursued her theme to the end, explaining the motive, plot, *dramatis personæ*, and noting the passages of the play which have passed into our familiar speech.

Presently, however, the door near the platform opened, and Mrs. Ormond, appearing on the threshold, looked anxiously at the president, and, having arrested her attention, beckoned her out.

Miss May, suavely summoning the vice-president to take her place — for she was a good parliamentarian, unlike the easy-going executive of the Aubrey de Veres — disappeared for a few minutes. Certain of the Daughters promptly improved the occasion — as nobody stood in awe of the vice-president — to interchange whispers about their calls on the bride, some earnestly maintaining that she was "a real sweet little thing," but more declaring her "nothing but a little French doll."

Miss May returned presently, and Mrs. Mint and Mrs. Ormond following her, took vacant places in the second row.

Miss May stood in front of the platform. Her serious and sorrowful face silenced in an instant the most persistent whisperer.

"I have the saddest tidings ever given you in this place," she said at last, with unsteady voice. "Our dear friend and associate, Esther Ward, is at the point of death. Our Holy Father has sent her the Apostolic Benediction. . . . Our friend bore herself so modestly among us that few of us realized we had in her one of the famous women of our time. But better than her work was her worth as a sincere, gentle and charitable woman. Who among us has not some personal reason to remember her kindly nature? Who among us ever heard from her lips a falsehood, a harsh judgment or a mischievous rumor?" . . .

Miss May paused again. "The circumstances preluding this sudden, and I fear fatal, illness, are extremely, I may say incredibly, sad. I beg of you all to pray for her."

Mrs. Jones nudged Mrs. Willow as Miss May resumed the chair.

"There! wasn't I right?" she whispered. "You see the affair has killed her. It was foolhardy of her to go to the wedding reception."

But Mrs. Willow gave no sign. She was crying softly, as were several of the younger Daughters.

"We shall conclude the meeting with the reading of the Lyrics, already assigned to Miss Fanny Brown," announced Miss May.

"Miss Brown!" Fanny came forward nervously; dropped her pages, picked them up again, stumbled

over her introduction, but finally recovered herself, and went on bravely to the final lyric:

"Done to death by slanderous tongues,"

she read, then came to an awful pause.

The stormy winter afternoon was darkening prematurely, and a spectral lightning flash zigzagged over Fanny's page. The secretary rose and turned on the electric lights.

"Done to death by slanderous tongues,"

read Fanny again, and then broke down ingloriously, and retreated to her place sobbing.

There were answering sobs from various parts of the assembly room. The meeting was thoroughly demoralized.

Miss May looked sadder and more troubled.

She tapped with her little gavel:

"Will some one kindly move adjournment?"

"I move that we adjourn," said Mrs. Jones, rising. She, at least, was tearless.

Several smothered voices seconded the motion.

Miss May tapped again for the prayer, asking all to join her in a *Memorare* for Esther Ward.

Then the Daughters rose, and resolved themselves into groups about the various windows. Few of them were prepared to face the storm; and most of them expected to be called for.

Mrs. Ormond lingered at the desk with Miss May.

Mrs. Mint stood moodily apart, having a window

all to herself, whence to watch for her carriage, which she had ordered for five o'clock.

Near her was a group of sympathetic Daughters, gathered about Fanny Brown, who still wept and wept, and would not be comforted.

"Why is Fanny Brown making such a scene?" queried Mrs. Jones petulantly, standing at the edge of the group.

"Why, don't *you* know?" retorted Nannie Oldfield, now restored to paternal and social favor as Mrs. James Dillon. "Don't *you* know, Mrs. Jones?" with wicked emphasis.

"Minnie, dear," to her old-time chum, "get me the book off Miss May's desk, if you dare, and I'll read the rest of the Lyric, till you see how it fits."

Nannie had some grievances of her own to redress, which helped to direct her sympathies.

Mrs. Jones moved further in, uneasily.

"I wonder what Miss May meant by the 'incredibly sad circumstances'?" Mrs. Macduff was saying.

"I don't know why you should wonder about that," said Mrs. Jones, taking up the conversation. "Haven't we all heard, and a good many of us seen for ourselves?"

"No, that wasn't it," dissented Mrs. Macduff with conviction. "Miss May would never touch on anything of that sort."

"That's my opinion, too," said Mrs. Willow, who was almost as tearful as Fanny Brown. "Oh, what

if we had got everything wrong from the start? Of course I was Esther Ward's best friend, and I was always careful what I said in this business, but"—

"Well, I was mistaken in one thing," faltered Mrs. Macduff. "It seems the gentleman who used to be going back and forth so much to her studio evenings was her brother. He was pointed out to me the other day, and I saw where I had blundered. But he does look awfully like Mr. Coleman."

"Well, of course it's barely possible I was wrong," put in Mrs. Ray; "but if ever there was anything that looked like a case of love at first sight . . . Haven't I often told you, in this very place"—

"Standing by this very window," sighed Mrs. Willow.

"How they met in my house, and what she said. And I'd have believed till my dying day that she never knew a thing about Bertrand Coleman's engagement, only Mrs. Coleman herself told me last week that her husband had made a confidante of Miss Ward. And Jane confided in her, too."

Mrs. Mint had drawn near the group.

"And you talked those tales over with Mrs. Coleman!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"Well, I guess I wasn't the first," said Mrs. Ray, bridling a little in the midst of her penitence.

"But how could anyone know they had trusted her, when she never gave the least hint of things, even to her best friends?" questioned Mrs. Willow, helplessly.

"I s'pose you'd have had her prove she was trusted by betraying her trust," snapped Mrs. Mint, though she was a little mollified by Mrs. Willow's evident grief.

"Well," said Mrs. Jones in her loftiest manner, "I think this old straw has been sufficiently thrashed. Of course it's all very pathetic and tragical and all that; and we're all very sorry that Miss Ward is a victim of unrequited affection; but it's better that we should do something for her, rather than talk about her. There may be something she needs — I don't imagine she's got anything saved, the way she dressed and lived. For my part, I intend going over tonight, and" —

Mrs. Mint was staring full at her on these last words, with such a stern and searching gaze that the woman finally quailed under it.

"*You!*" exclaimed Mrs. Mint (by this time all eyes were riveted on Mrs. Jones) "*you — oh — you* BUG!"

A genuine insect of the most offensive variety, dropped into that group of refined-looking and smooth-spoken women, could hardly have created more consternation.

Fanny Brown snickered hysterically through her tears.

The others exchanged dismayed and apprehensive glances.

Mrs. Jones attempted to extricate herself from the group, but Mrs. Mint effectually blocked her exit.

"You go to Esther Ward on her bed of death! Don't you dare, unless you go to beg her pardon for all the wrong you've done her! You've been down on that poor girl these last two years, because she wouldn't grovel to you and paint your niece's picture for nothing"—

"That's so!" ejaculated Mrs. Macduff under her breath.

"Who started the falsehood that it was Esther Ward's illness, and not mine, that kept us so long over in Paris? Who gave all that stuff to the *Social Events?*"

"I didn't know she was a reporter," faltered Mrs. Jones.

"Didn't know it was loaded, eh? That's a pretty stale excuse for a woman at your time of life. I suppose you knew where you were at, though, when you entertained a man you never saw before, with all your imaginations and inventions, the first time he ever set foot in your house."

"Mr. Esmond!" whispered Mrs. Ray to Mrs. Willow — "but what could he — oh!" as Mrs. Wise gave her a glance of preternatural intelligence; and both ladies squeezed each others' hands until they hurt.

"I suppose you knew where you were at when you wrote those letters to Baychester, to get the history of the Ward family raked up for you. Oh, but we should have clean houses ourselves, before we go in to regulate our neighbors'!"

Mrs. Jones' face was livid. Everyone in the assembly room was looking and listening now; for Mrs. Mint's voice was neither low nor sweet.

"Didn't you try the same game on me, when you thought I'd lost my money — going about with your vile hints and insinuations! Oh, if I'd known as much about your talk then, as I know now, I'd have had the law of you."

Mrs. Mint paused, panting.

"Mrs. Mint's carriage!" announced the janitor.

"As for the rest of you," she concluded, with a glance that took in the whole group, "haven't you husbands and homes and children to look after? Couldn't you, if you tried very hard, find a little business of your own to mind? Daughters of St. Paula, indeed! Your mother must be proud of you!"

"She's a low, vulgar creature, and ought to be publicly expelled from our society!" exclaimed Mrs. Jones, when the door had shut on her redoubtable antagonist.

No one responded. The group had moved off from her, and only Mrs. Macduff said "Good-night," when presently the Jones carriage was announced, and its owner departed.

The tide had turned.

Maids came with waterproofs and umbrellas; a carriage or two more were called; but still Mrs. Ormond talked in low and earnest tones with Miss

May, at the desk; and still Mrs. Wise and Mrs. Willow held their own private consultation at the window.

At last Mrs. Wise approached the desk:

"Mrs. Ormond, you have proved yourself Miss Ward's friend, and we meant to be her friends, even if we were misled by foolish talk. I'm not saying but what we should have held our tongues; but now, if there's anything in God's world we can do, give us the chance to do it. Mrs. Willow feels awfully. She wants to know if it isn't possible for her to see Miss Ward, if only for a second."

Miss May looked coldly at her. Mrs. Ormond, however, reflected.

"Miss Ward was not conscious when I left her two hours ago," she said gently. "But I'll see what can be done. Meantime there is a way for both of you to help. Is Mrs. Willow's carriage here?"

"Yes; it has been waiting half an hour."

"Perhaps she will take us all over to Miss Ward's"—

"We can leave you at home — we go right by"— to Miss May's objection that Mr. Holmwood was awaiting her by appointment.

"You know, perhaps," explained Mrs. Ormond to the others, "that Jack Holmwood has just been received into the Church. He is Miss Ward's convert."

Mrs. Willow's tears fell afresh — for she was

a loyal Catholic — to think that she had ever had a coldness with this dear friend, who was dying with the Apostolic Benediction upon her, and who had brought into the Church this hard-headed Unitarian.

The ladies started. There were lights in the studio, and Mrs. Wise perceived through the half-drawn curtains a lady and two gentlemen in close conversation.

Mrs. Ormond alighted first.

"Look!" whispered Mrs. Wise to her friend excitedly, holding her back an instant on the threshold. "As I live, there's Bertrand Coleman himself, and Jane, and" —

"Come in quickly," said Mrs. Ormond.

. . . . . .

Had Mrs. Ormond's searchlight accomplished its purpose?

"It may be as well not to tell too much," she said, an hour later, bidding Mrs. Willow and Mrs. Wise goodnight; "but I leave it all to your friendship and discretion."

I fear Mrs. Ormond also was a diplomat.

The following day, at a most unfashionable hour, Mrs. Willow's carriage was in requisition, and she and Mrs. Wise, with full card-cases, began the longest and most interesting series of calls they had ever made in their lives.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SUNRISE IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW.

About the time that Mrs. Willow and Mrs. Wise were holding the amazed attention of a very large group at Mrs. Ray's Day, Esther Ward opened conscious eyes again.

Father Herman, Mrs. Ormond, Mrs. Mint and her brother Joseph were standing by her bed.

Joseph first caught the gleam of recognition in those large, bright eyes, and bending, kissed his sister's forehead. He could not trust himself to a word.

Esther smiled faintly at him, and then looked earnestly at Father Herman.

The priest placed a Crucifix in her hands.

"Has it come to this, Father?"

"I think it has, my child," he answered.

"Thank God!" said Esther.

Father Herman slipped on his stole, and motioned to the others to withdraw.

"Esther," he said, half an hour later, "offer your will to God for life or death, as it pleases Him."

"Oh, not for life!" she whispered with a shudder. "Father, ask God not to send me back to that."

"Christ shrank from the Cross in Gethsemane," the priest murmured, "but He prayed to His Father, 'Not My will, but Thine be done.' Esther, be generous, though I doubt that you have twenty-four hours to live."

The woman bent her head and kissed the Crucifix.

"And now, my child, I go to bring the Holy Viaticum. Attend, meantime, to any necessary worldly affair."

There was a sound of smothered weeping at the door, and as the priest passed out, Gregory Ray, with tumbled hair and swollen eyes, rushed in and throwing his arms about Esther's neck, pressed his wet, freckled cheek to hers.

She stroked her favorite's hair with her wan little hand.

Father Herman turned back.

"Come, come, Gregory. If you cry like this you cannot come back with me to make the responses when I bring Miss Esther Holy Communion."

Joe, who had just telegraphed for his wife, came in as the priest and the boy departed. He had a letter in his hand.

"Esther," he said, sitting down beside her, and taking her hand in his. "We have heard from Ned at last. He writes from San Francisco. He is well and in good employment, and sends you this check for five hundred dollars — half of what you spent to save him last March."

Esther smiled happily. "It is as Bertrand Coleman promised," she said softly. "Joe, let me endorse the check, and do you cash it without delay. It will cover what must be done when I am gone. My will is in the top drawer of my desk. I have saved Mr. Coleman's money. And tell Ned that I forgive the rest of his debt, and send him my loving good-by."

Ellen came to arrange the bed and give her patient a strengthening drink. Esther slipped Ned's letter under her pillow.

Mrs. Ormond stood in the place which Joe had left.

"Esther, by-and-by you may know the enemy and the friend for whom I ask forgiveness, and the wrong done to you, for which we both ask it" —

"As I have been forgiven," she answered.

Her strength was failing, but she reached up both hands and drew Mrs. Ormond nearer: "And if you ever see Arthur Esmond again, tell him that I passed away loving him, trusting him, praying for him."

Mrs. Ormond hid her face for a moment on the dying woman's pillow; then gently disengaging herself, stole out, and Esther turned away from earthly things to rest her broken heart on the promises of Him Who was drawing near to be her strength in the supreme hour.

How strange it was! how different from all she

had ever forecast for dying, this solemn yet peaceful sadness! She felt a sinking of the heart, and connected thought was becoming an effort. No words of prayer came to her, but some lines of a hymn of Father Faber's, which they used to sing long ago on Communion days in the convent, when she was a child:

> "Had I but Mary's sinless heart
> To love Thee with, my dearest King."

Yet now this seemed the prayer of prayers, and she said it over and over, with all her heart.

Was it a moment or an hour till Mrs. Ormond came in again, noiselessly, to light the candles on the little altar prepared for the Last Sacraments? Taking another lighted candle, she went forth to meet at the doorway of the studio the bearer of the Divine Guest, and Esther descried, as in a glass, darkly, familiar figures from the life she had done with, among the kneeling women.

Her brother and poor little Gregory attended the priest.

It was all over soon — the wayfarer was strengthened for her long journey with the Bread prefigured of old to the fiery prophet by that food in whose strength he fared on his weary way unto the mount of God. With the sacred Unction anointed, with the blessing of Christ's Vicar signed, they left her again to prayer and silence.

"*O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, I*

am become in Thy Presence as one finding peace."

Esther had feared she would not die, because death was touching her so gently. Only faces of peace looked at her out of the dimness. Only loving voices hailed her in the Borderland whereon her spirit traveled.

Then this befell, in that strange land — no dream, she knew, but veriest sight.

She walked across a sweet mown meadow, in the summer twilight, and she was not alone. But whosoever bore her company, she saw not, for her eyes were held.

The sun had gone down, leaving in the west a dull red afterglow, and above it rested a vast bar of deep violet.

High in the east the moon shone, companioned by a single star, and both were veiled with a little filmy cloud.

But, lo! as she looked upward the cloud blushed on the edges a rosy red, and Esther knew that the moon never gave forth this warm radiance.

And behold! the summer meadow and the moon vanished, and she was standing on the shore of a mighty sea, and the tide was coming in, and the sun was rising in glory. Rose-red was the sky to the zenith, rose-red were the waves to their depths, rose-red was the very earth, with a pulsing, palpitating radiance.

"Like the Blood of the Redeemer shown on earth and sky."

And a withered bush which grew close to the water's edge, sprang suddenly into life and flower, and glowed verily like another Burning Bush in the sunrise. . . .

Then Esther knew that she would surely die; and that the unseen presence which walked beside her was none other than her Guardian Angel, miraging for her comfort ere they two went down together into the Valley of the Shadow, a glimpse of the glory of the City of God.

. . . . . .

Life ebbed away slowly, slowly, and the past began to live again before those failing eyes.

She was a little child again, and her mother with deft fingers tied back her bushy brown hair with a pretty pink ribbon, and bowed her broad sash, and sent her to play with her brother under the big plum-tree in the back garden of the old home far away. Then it was a rainy day, and she sat by the attic windows drawing crude pencil pictures of her little memories or fancies on the fly-leaves of discarded school-books.

Anon she was an ambitious schoolgirl, praying at Benediction in the convent chapel for success in some premium contest, while the tapers burned softly, and the incense rose in fragrant clouds, and her artist soul felt the homesick note when the choir sang:

Nobis donet in patria.

"O God, be merciful to me; for I am dying!" prayed Esther, as she drifted back again to the familiar room, with the lamp burning before Christ of the Pierced Heart on the altar at the foot of her bed.

But still she lived; for it was as if the receding tide were held at the fifth hour, and bidden neither to ebb nor flow.

And again her spirit wandered down the pathways of the past, and she was a girl with the glamour of romance upon her, and she walked in the moonlight under the trees of a broad village street with other maidens and youths, and they sang songs of love and tender longing.

Nor seemed it strange at all that these youths and maidens had the faces of the men and women among whom her later life was cast, and who had made the tragedy of it; that Arthur Esmond besought her love with the voice of one who was in his grave for many a summer; nor that Bertrand Coleman and his sister were of the companions of her girlhood.

Then saw she the blighted home again, and watched by untimely dying-beds. . . . Anon, pale flowers sprang once more in the desolated field of life, for life was young; and the soul of art began to yearn for expression, and would not be denied. And this was in Italy.

"Oh, God be merciful to me, for I am surely dying," she prayed again, for some movement of the nurse

who kept vigil beside her brought Esther back to her little white bed, and the sense of parched lips and helplessness.

The watcher saw no change as she ministered to the wants of her patient. She was still semi-conscious, one little thin hand aimlessly fingering the counterpane, while the other clasped the Crucifix.

But a great change was wrought before Esther's eyes, for now the dearest dead of all her years were with her. Her mother's large, dark eyes looked wistfully at her, and her father, standing a little further off, whispered: "We are waiting for you."

She saw the little sisters, who had passed away before she knew their faces; and the forgotten long-dead playmates of her childhood.

And stranger still, she saw Arthur Esmond. Could it be that he also had died, and now, knowing all truly, as the dead who die in Christ know it, had come back with the rest to comfort her in the Valley of the Shadow?

Somebody spoke, and the words came clearly to her:

"Yes, let him stay; it will neither hurt nor help. She is too far gone for that. Nothing matters any more."

She smiled to herself at these last words, remembering how often she had spoken them from a heart full of anguish.

How far she had drifted from those days of storm

and stress, and how sweet was this waiting in humble peace and hope, with Arthur Esmond's eyes upon her, as her mother's just had been, and more than the old love in them!

But would a spirit weep those burning tears over her face, and enfold her as with a strong man's arms? What strange things happened on the very edge of death!

She lay passive, gazing wistfully, wonderingly; and as she gazed, the well-remembered objects in her room wavered back, and steadied themselves before her eyes; and she knew the glimmer of the street lamp through the closed shutters of her windows.

Her gaze concentrated on the face so near her own. She lifted her hand, and hesitating, like a little timid child, touched the cheek. Her dream was broken.

"Oh, Arthur! and you are not dead?"

Her voice was so faint that he had to lean closer to her to hear it; but her soul was in the eyes she fixed on him.

"Esther, Esther, forgive me and stay with me!" he pleaded brokenly. "I came to myself at last, out of my jealous madness, and gave up my commission, and traveled back from San Francisco to tell you that I would take your word against the world, and I found you unconscious, and at the point of death. . . . But you shall not die — Heaven has been stormed for your life."

With her last remnant of strength she tried to draw out of the arms which would hold her back from welcome death.

"Oh, Arthur, let me go. My fear of death is past. . . . I have no other wish for earth now I have seen you . . . and heard your voice . . . in love . . . And you know . . . everything."

"Yes, from your friends, Mrs. Ormond and Mr. Coleman; but before they had spoken, I knew that you were the truest and bravest of women, and that I, in my wicked suspicion, was viler than the mud upon the road."

She ceased for the moment her effort to be free of his encircling arms. "You shall not defame the man I love," she whispered.

He knew her gracious ways of old.

"My generous Esther!" he murmured. "You will not leave me, now that God has let us meet at all, after all these years and all your sorrow?"

"Oh, Arthur, if you love me, let me go," she murmured, drawing back as far as she could from those beseeching eyes and lips.

"I have come to see God's hand in our separation . . . in all the pain and shame. . . . It has been all for the best . . . for you . . . for me . . . I could not have filled the place you planned for me . . . it is clear to me now . . . Go, my dearest; you can help me better in my last hour . . . if you stay where I cannot see your face."

There was a long silence between them. He relaxed his embrace; but he still knelt beside her, one arm above her head upon the pillow, where his hand touched her thick brown braids. Even in the dim light, from the little lamp at the shrine, he could see how small and shadowy were Esther's form and face, but her forehead was dry, and she breathed without effort.

"Esther," he said again, "if God willed you to come back to life"—

Her eyes clouded. "Oh, no, my dearest. God does not will it. I am surely going to die."

"And you are glad to go?"

"So glad!" she murmured.

"Even from me, my dearest?"

"For your sake. I can be more to you when, through God's mercy, I get to Heaven."

"Esther, before you leave me you will give me the one perfect, satisfying proof of your forgiveness?"

"Surely I will," she answered, lifting his hand with a supreme effort and pressing it to her cheek and lips.

"Every one knows now," he went on, "what parted us. Every one knows now how cruelly I misjudged you. Through my fault you are on your dying bed"—

"Oh, no, no," she murmured.

"But I will live the rest of my lonely life know-

ing that I have killed you, and everyone will know it. Are you resigned to leave me to such a fate?"

The peacefulness went out of Esther's eyes. There was a long silence, and she prayed in her heart.

"Arthur, God knows that I would gladly bear all your sorrow for you. . . . But, oh, my dearest . . . can't you see that I am . . . where there is no turning back?"

"At least let my reparation be as clear and as long to be remembered," he pleaded, "as the wrong I did you. You will not refuse my last request!"

"You could not ask me what I should refuse," she answered, "and you have my promise."

"Then, Esther, be my wife, though you live but an hour to bear my name, and take my ring into the grave with you."

"I would not cast my shadow on your life," she sighed.

"The memory of you as my own will light my way to Heaven," he murmured; and then: "I have your word."

He left her for a moment, and presently returned with Father Herman. Her brother, Jane Coleman and Mrs. Ormond followed, and they left the door wide open.

Esther's eyes sought Father Herman's.

"You will not grudge him this comfort, my child," said the priest.

. . . . . .

The brief marriage service was over, and Mrs. Willow had seen and heard it all, smiling cheerfully through her tears, for a wedding is a wedding, even if the shadow of death is on it.

The ring turned loosely on the bride's small finger. Arthur Esmond took another ring out of the little case in his hand. It was the pearl ring of her betrothal.

"Perhaps this will hold it — it seems a little smaller," he said diffidently.

But Esther shrank from it. "Give it to Father Herman for his chalice," she said softly.

The priest hastened away, for it was nearly midnight now, promising to come in after his Mass next morning.

He met Doctor Allen at the entrance, and told him briefly what had happened; but the doctor only repeated his words of two hours previous: "Nothing matters now. She is too far gone for that."

He drew near his patient's bedside. She was very tired and spoke with effort. He looked closely at her, and then a significant look passed between him and the nurse.

"I believe I'll stay," he said, turning quickly to Joe. "Can't you fix me up a place where I can sleep for a few hours? Call me," to Ellen, "if there is a change; and meantime, keep her quiet. Out with you, every one," to the group about the bed; "and don't look at her again till I give you leave."

At six o'clock Doctor Allen woke of himself, and went back to his patient.

Meantime Arthur Esmond, Joe and his wife, Mrs. Ormond and Jane Coleman, who had watched and prayed through the night, met again in the studio. Mrs. Willow and Mrs. Wise had heard Father Herman's Mass on their way back, and presently joined them.

Father Herman soon followed, and went into Esther's room, carefully closing the door. The watchers held their breath. It seemed hours until it was softly opened again, and the priest beckoned in the husband and the brother.

Another interval of suspense; and just as the sunrise revealed itself through the closed shutters in long shafts of crimson light, Father Herman came out, shutting the door noiselessly.

His face was paler than its wont, and hard to read.

"Oh, no! Father — don't say it, don't!" cried Mrs. Willow.

The priest lifted his hand.

"Wait, my child," to Mrs. Willow; then to us all: "Let us thank God, Esther will live."

THE END.

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